

Vietnam
DECLASSIFIED

The CIA and Counterinsurgency



Thomas L. Ahern Jr.
Foreword by Donald P. Gregg

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For John O'Reilly, whose wit and wisdom
leavened a deeply personal
engagement with the fate of South Vietnam

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Foreword

What is the point of a meticulously written, four-hundred-page study of a strenuously pursued failure that lasted for twenty years? Who will read it, and what will be derived from a reading of it?

First, the book is a detailed study of the Central Intelligence Agency's involvement in rural pacification operations in South Vietnam, a prolonged effort that involved the participation of more American case officers than any other commitment made by the agency since its founding in 1947. If one is interested in how the CIA performed under pressure, in difficult and dangerous conditions, here is a great place to begin.

Second, the book balances, in a way, Tim Weiner's *Legacy of Ashes*, a lugubrious history of CIA that is heavily focused on ill-conceived "covert actions" that American presidents ordered the agency to undertake. Shortly after the book's publication in 2007, Richard Dearlove, the retired director of Britain's MI6 intelligence service, rose to CIA's defense, saying that it had done many things well that Weiner had made no mention of. This book gives strong support to Dearlove's assertion.

Finally, Tom Ahern's work clearly lays out the basic flaws in the policy framework within which all Americans in Vietnam had to work that contributed directly to failure at all levels of our civilian and military efforts. For example, Secretary of State Dean Rusk's often-repeated mantra for the war was "We just want North Vietnam to leave South Vietnam alone." Poor operational planning, unexamined assumptions, and an "analytical void" all made it very difficult to measure progress in the pacification programs. In his excellent preface, Ahern sheds light on what he calls "compelling similarities" between what we tried and failed to do in Vietnam and what we are currently trying to accomplish in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. He believes, and I agree, that there are lessons from Vietnam that may well apply to our current travails in dealing with radical Islam.

My first direct contact with Vietnam came in February 1962, when I vis-

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ited Saigon before becoming chief of the Vietnam desk in the Directorate of Operations at CIA, a position I held until mid-1964. In September 1970, after service in Burma and Japan, I returned to Bien Hoa, Vietnam, as regional officer in charge of the ten provinces surrounding Saigon. My tour ended in June 1972.

During my 1962 visit, I met with General Paul Harkins, Military Assistance Command commander, who assured me that “we will be out of Vietnam in six months with a military victory.” This unqualified assertion did not seem to be borne out by anything that I observed during my orientation, but I heard Harkins make the same claim to other visitors.

In Washington, the policy establishment was still assessing the impact of the 1961 Bay of Pigs disaster. Even before the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, Havana, as a Soviet satellite, was seen to be an emerging threat to the stability of Latin America through subversion and insurgency.

In Southeast Asia, Vietnam was seen through the prism of the Korean War; Korea was another divided country, with a hostile northern half strongly backed by the USSR and China, which were still seen to be operating in close and harmonious cooperation. The true implications of the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, and France’s subsequent withdrawal from Vietnam, had been completely missed. Instead of seeing France’s debacle as the end of the colonial era in Southeast Asia, we chose to deal with the region in the stark and rigid terms of the cold war. And the most pernicious of the “unexamined assumptions” was our rigid belief that China was the main threat to South Vietnam, when in fact it was the implacable nationalistic desire of the North Vietnamese to reunify their country that was our true opponent.

A recently published book by Gordon M. Goldstein, *Lessons in Disaster*, details the role played by McGeorge Bundy, Kennedy’s national security adviser, in taking us to war in Vietnam. Bundy was a devout believer in the domino theory, and as Henry Kissinger puts it in his review of the book, “Bundy and his senior colleagues defined the domino effect as involving the Philippines, Thailand, Japan, Malaysia, Indonesia, South Korea and Taiwan. . . . The new Kennedy administration even added a philosophical refinement. Vietnam was no longer treated as one of the many fronts in the global cold war but as the central front.”

So strong were these misperceptions that hundreds of thousands of American soldiers fought in Vietnam wearing a Military Assistance Command shoulder patch symbolically depicting the shining sword of America repelling Chinese aggression.

George Kennan’s theory of containment was still the central concept used

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in fighting the cold war. The Marshall Plan and NATO were seen to have thwarted direct Soviet attacks on Western Europe. The new and emerging cold war threats were seen as subversion and insurgency, carried out in Latin America by Cuba, acting as a Soviet surrogate, and in Southeast Asia by North Vietnam, acting as China's cat's-paw.

"Counterinsurgency" emerged as the new watchword, and I was fortunate enough to be included in the first counterinsurgency course, a three-week program teaching us how to win "the hearts and minds" of peasants threatened by subversion. Upon graduation, our class was taken to the White House, where we all shook President Kennedy's hand.

Less than a year later, President Kennedy had been assassinated, and South Vietnamese president Ngo Dinh Diem had been overthrown, with the semi-secret support of Washington. In December 1963, in the wake of these twin disasters, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara made a three-day visit to Saigon. I was the CIA representative on his delegation, and I watched McNamara's growing exasperation as he heard an endless repetition from province- and district-level U.S. Army officers of General Harkins's assertion that we would achieve a military victory in six months.

McNamara's report to President Lyndon Johnson was highly critical of both General Harkins and Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge for groundless optimism and poor mission coordination. Lodge's response was a call for the application of more pressure on North Vietnam to stop supporting the insurgency in the South.

As a result, a war game was conducted in the spring of 1964 to test the efficacy of an escalating series of bombing attacks on North Vietnam. Air Force general Curtis LeMay was a vociferous supporter of these air attacks, believing that not only North Vietnam but also China would respond in kind by bombing Saigon. LeMay, itching to bomb China's emerging nuclear capacity, saw such hypothetical attacks as justification for direct strikes against China. The results of the war game showed clearly that bombing would not deter North Vietnam. Nevertheless, air attacks were started a few months later. No retaliation from either North Vietnam or China took place.

Such was the delusional quality of top-level policy development in the 1962–1964 period. As I write these words, I am vividly reminded of similar miscalculations that attended our 2003 invasion of Iraq, and it is possible to wonder if we are doing any better today than we did forty-five years earlier.

However, I believe that we are doing better in Iraq and will eventually do better in Afghanistan because we have finally found a general who clearly understands the nature of counterinsurgency. Based on his study of such books

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as H. R. McMaster's *Dereliction of Duty*, General David Petraeus has truly learned lessons from Vietnam that tragically escaped Generals Harkins, William Westmoreland, and Creighton Abrams. Westmoreland's yardstick for measuring progress was essentially enemy body count, and his mantra was an endless call for more American troops. Abrams was far better, but still never fully grasped what he was dealing with. I had lunch with him in late June 1972, after he had been in Vietnam for five years. Abrams told me proudly that he had just read Bernard Fall's classic book on the battle of Dien Bien Phu, *Hell in a Very Small Place*, and that he now understood what Fall meant when he said that the French lost in Vietnam because "they failed to politically organize the terrain." A lesson learned far too late by Abrams, but clearly understood by Petraeus, who also seems to have a clear appreciation of CIA's role in counterinsurgency.

As one who was first introduced to the world of intelligence in 1946, when I was trained as a cryptanalyst, I am a firm believer in the need for talented intelligence services with a strong determination always to "tell truth to power," even when, as is often the case, truth is the last thing power wants to hear. When I was on active duty, CIA had had a reluctance to look back at its operational record or to hold postmortems. I welcome the fact that Ahern's studies, once highly classified, are now being made public.

I believe that the best colleges and universities should offer courses on the history of American intelligence. Such courses could over time produce potential recruits with a real understanding of what intelligence gathering and analysis is all about, and where the intelligence agencies have succeeded and where they have failed. Such people, in my view, would make far better case officers and analysts than those whose motivation to enter the world of intelligence is based on myths purveyed by spy novels and films. To all those seriously considering a career in intelligence work, I strongly recommend this book.

Donald P. Gregg,
Former National Security Adviser
to Vice President George H. W. Bush
and former U.S. Ambassador to South Korea

Preface

No one still believes that history has come to an end. On the contrary, the further the twenty-first century advances, the more it resembles the one that preceded it. Millenarian ideology—once political, and now religious—aggravated by nationalist and ethnic antagonisms, dominates the politics of what is euphemistically (and patronizingly) called the developing world. The resulting conflicts play out on a stage still shaped by the legacy of European colonialism.

The twentieth-century history of Vietnam displays all these features. Nationalism, anticolonialism, sectarian strife, and plain xenophobia all played a part in a struggle seen by the communist Vietnamese as one of national liberation and by American political and military leaders in terms of the existential confrontation between communism and liberal democracy. With Islamic fundamentalism substituted for Leninism, very similar things define the contemporary battle between radical Islam and the West.

Warlords and the Taliban in Afghanistan, the Sunni-Shia antagonism in Iraq, ungoverned and perhaps ungovernable tribal areas in Pakistan—all have their counterparts in the Vietnam of the Second Indochina War. I do not, of course, suggest that today's problems in the Middle East are identical to those confronted in Vietnam. But there are compelling similarities. And I do suggest that American political and military leaders brought a nearly identical mind-set, one deeply rooted in our culture, to their initial reaction to both cases. Faith in the efficacy of force, especially when supplemented by material largesse bestowed on a client population, is supported by unreflective confidence that the client needs and wants “freedom and democracy.”

The effects of this mind-set were aggravated in Vietnam by thorny practical problems, some of which we see again in our wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and in our incursions in northwestern Pakistan. One is that of leverage: how do we promote a government that is truly independent and yet responsive to U.S. guidance, especially on the inevitable occasions when its policy predilections seem to us not just ill considered but actually self-destructive? Also: can

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the need for security be reconciled with building democratic institutions? That is, can we support rule by autocrat or junta and still see progress toward representative government? And can we prescribe the content of a governmental or political program—a constitution, say—to ensure its democratic authenticity, and still hope to see it become an organic part of the political culture we're trying to create?

Other such questions: can we win the loyalty of a population living in a subsistence economy by raising its material standard of living? What is the role of physical security in gaining or holding peasant allegiance? In particular, can we or a surrogate government win active acceptance by introducing forces from outside to protect a population that does not participate in its own defense?

And finally, how do we solve the dilemma that results when the destruction seen as necessary to defeat an insurgency alienates the very population we seek to bring over to its government's cause?

The story of the American venture in South Vietnam can be seen as having three overlapping aspects. The first is the military, a war of movement pitting U.S. and the government of South Vietnam forces against the communists' regulars. Second is the governmental, the effort to create national political institutions. Third, the part of the story told here, is the struggle to suppress the Viet Cong and win the loyalty of the peasantry. It is told primarily from the perspective of the CIA officers who supported and helped to shape the Saigon government's effort to defeat the insurgency. I have also included the perspectives of insurgents, key South Vietnamese participants, and peasant witnesses to the struggle.

Throughout, I am concerned to try to answer the question a version of which now challenges us in the Middle East: how—and how accurately—did the CIA, along with its Vietnamese and U.S. government partners, see the nature of the long struggle to defeat the Viet Cong and create a pro-Western polity south of the 17th parallel?

This account of the CIA's participation in rural pacification in South Vietnam describes specific programs against the background of the evolving agency—and U.S. government—understanding of the insurgency and of the political environment in which it took place. This evolution took place in a spontaneous, intuitive way, which accounts for the improvisational flavor of the programs themselves. Unconstrained by doctrine and thus free to experiment, agency managers were free to indulge the pragmatic style that suited the can-do CIA ethos. Responsiveness to the particularities of local situations allowed them to help the Vietnamese achieve numerous tactical successes. But the effort was hobbled throughout by the absence of a comprehensive, coher-

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ent definition of the nature of the conflict and of the means required to win it, and without such a definition there could be no strategic thinking. Local and often transitory successes failed to win enough of the peasantry into active identification with their government to establish the Saigon government's political legitimacy and choke off popular support for the communists.

Even today, many people tend to take that legitimacy for granted when they try to explain the outcome in terms of ill-conceived or poorly managed American policy. But victory—if it was ever to mean anything more than the survival of a garrison state in the South—depended on the Saigon government's ability to command the positive loyalty of its people, most of whom lived in the countryside. This it failed to do, and in what follows I try to explain why.

One thing that CIA officers discovered, as they roamed the provinces in search of opportunities to help the host government establish its political authority, was that popular attitudes were far from unambiguously anticommunist. On the contrary, the Viet Cong—the Southern communist apparatus—maintained a substantial, in some places dominant, political presence even after U.S. and South Vietnamese firepower had neutralized it as a military threat in 1969 and 1970. One often hears the argument that this reduction of the insurgency's military potency constituted success, a victory forsworn when the United States failed, at the end, to help Saigon resist the subsequent waves of North Vietnamese invaders. But that misses the point. When the United States deployed regular forces to South Vietnam in 1965, it did so to avoid imminent defeat, for the Viet Cong were even then well on the way to full control of the countryside.

With U.S. and, later, other allied combat units on the scene, the North accepted that it could no longer count on the Southern insurgency alone to defeat the Saigon government. Hanoi did indeed hope for a decisive victory with the Tet offensive of 1968, but it never abandoned or even interrupted its conventional military buildup in the South, as U.S. forces had at that point long since discovered. Meanwhile, the essential function of the Viet Cong insurgency had been and remained political; it was to command peasant loyalty, by persuasion if possible and by coercion if not. In so doing, it weakened Saigon's always tenuous hold on its most numerous constituency while obtaining for both Northern and Viet Cong forces essential support in the form of supplies, intelligence, and manpower.

Meanwhile, as the negotiations between the United States and North Vietnam dragged on after 1968, the Viet Cong—now the National Liberation Front (NLF)—commenced building the village and hamlet Liberation Committees. These would have conducted the political contest that many on both sides

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assumed would follow the cessation of hostilities. But during this same period, American support for Saigon's pacification effort withered, and the South Vietnamese, never deeply committed to the program, allowed it to atrophy.

To identify the real lessons in an episode as complicated and painful as the Vietnam War is valuable if it does no more than clarify the distorted public memory that has grown up around the subject. Something else that deserves clarification is the role of the Central Intelligence Agency in rural security operations in South Vietnam. Mine is a warts-and-all perspective, and the reader will discover both real, if transitory, successes, and also some fundamental criticisms. One example of the latter: throughout the entire twenty-one years of the war, the agency never once conducted a comprehensive study of the triangular political struggle that pitted the Saigon government against the NLF while both contended for the allegiance of the peasant masses. This self-inflicted blindness deprived U.S. intelligence and policy makers of an informed projection of the likely outcome. Another example, flowing from the first, was the failure of intelligence to challenge the assumption that a government certified as legitimate by the United States and the United Nations had to be and was accepted as such by its own population. To a great many Vietnamese, in varying degrees, it wasn't.

Phoenix is here, in an account that shows it to have been more a failed bureaucratic gambit than an instrument of brutal repression. Something that *was* brutal, on both sides, was the contest between agency-sponsored Provincial Reconnaissance Units and the security forces of the Viet Cong, and this, too, is described. But the book discusses the other side as well, the side that displayed what effective Vietnamese leadership could do, with U.S. help, to win peasant allegiance, even as it revealed the structural defects that led to the South's demise.

Perhaps more important than the programs themselves is the gradual learning process. Over the nearly twenty-year span of its engagement in the war in the countryside, the agency acquired insights that came closer than those of any other U.S. government organ to a comprehensive understanding of the insurgency. But these were incremental and diffuse. For myself, I left Vietnam in 1965 with essentially no understanding of what the United States was up against; I knew we were losing, but I had no idea why the Saigon government was in retreat in the countryside, and the Viet Cong ascendant. Now, in better-informed hindsight, it seems to me that the experience of Vietnam may have real instructive value today, as the sole remaining superpower faces a world full of religious, ethnic, and nationalistic strife.

Acknowledgments

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I am especially grateful to the many colleagues and friends who so generously consented to interviews. Gary Williams and Tom Donohue are among those who submitted to especially lengthy interrogation. Lew Lapham, now, sadly, deceased, welcomed me as a houseguest for his interview, and Tran Ngoc Chau deserves particular thanks for his unstinting help during the course of a three-day session.

There are major contributors to the effort whom I have never met. These are the station officers whose reporting supplies so much of both the substance and the tone of this account. The candor and unblinking intellectual honesty of people like Robert Peart—to cite only one example—figure very largely in any success this book may have in conveying the experience of the agency officers engaged in counterinsurgency in South Vietnam.

Abbreviations

AMA	American Medical Association
APA	Advance Political Action (Teams)
APC	Accelerated Pacification Campaign
ARVN	Army of the Republic of [South] Vietnam
C-G	Census-Grievance
CG	Civil Guard [predecessor of Regional Forces]
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CIDG	Citizens' [later, Civilian] Irregular Defense Groups
CINCPAC	Commander in chief Pacific
CIO [GVN]	Central Intelligence Organization
CORDS [MACV]	Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support
COS	Chief of station
COSVN	Central Office for South Vietnam [the communist Lao Dong Party element representing Hanoi in South Vietnam]
CSD	Combined Studies Division [also, Military Operations Section]
C-T	Counter-Terror
DCI	Director of Central Intelligence
DCOS	Deputy chief of station
DDP	Deputy director for Plans
DGNP	Director general of National Police
DIOCC	District Intelligence and Operations Coordination Center
DMZ	Demilitarized zone, at the 17th parallel
DOD	Department of Defense
FEC	French Expeditionary Corps
FP	Force Populaire

Abbreviations

GVN	Government of [South] Vietnam
HES	Hamlet Evaluation System
ICA	International Cooperation Administration [a USAID predecessor]
ICEX	Intelligence Collection and Exploitation staff [of the U.S. Mission in Saigon]
IOD	Intelligence Operations Division [of the CIA Station in Saigon]
JGS [ARVN]	Joint General Staff
MAAG	Military Assistance Advisory Group
MACV	Military Assistance Command, Vietnam [succeeded MAAG]
MOS	Military Operations Section [of the CIA Station in Saigon]
MR	Military Region
MRD	Ministry of Revolutionary Development [in Vietnamese, Ministry of Rural Construction]
MSS [ARVN]	Military Security Service
NIC	National Interrogation Center
NICC [Joint GVN-U.S.]	National Intelligence Coordination Center
NLF	National Liberation Front
NPPF	National Police Field Force
NRM	National Revolutionary Movement
OB	Operation Brotherhood
OCO	Office of Civil Operations [of the U.S. Mission in Saigon]
PAS	Political Action Section [of the CIA Station in Saigon; earlier, POS]
PAT	People's Action Team [later, Revolutionary Development Cadre Group]
PF	Popular Forces
PIC	Provincial Interrogation Center
POS	Political Operations Section [of the CIA Station in Saigon]
PRG	Provisional Revolutionary Government
PRU	Provincial Reconnaissance Unit [earlier, Counter-Terror Team]
PSB	Police Special Branch

Abbreviations

PSDF	People's Self-Defense Forces
RD	Revolutionary Development [GVN title: Rural Construction]
RDCG	Revolutionary Development Cadre group [final nomenclature, after PAT and RDC Team; also occasionally referred to as Rural Development People's Group (RDPG)]
RF	Regional Forces
ROIC	Regional officer in charge
SAVA	Special assistant [to the DCI] for Vietnam Affairs
SDC	Self-Defense Corps [predecessor of PF]
SMM	Saigon Military Mission
USAID	U.S. Agency for International Development
USIS	U.S. Information Service
USOM	U.S. Operations Mission [country office of USAID]
USSF	U.S. Special Forces
VC	Viet Cong
VCI	Viet Cong infrastructure
VIS	[South] Vietnam Information Service
VNO	Vietnam Operations [element in CIA Headquarters]
VNQDD	Vietnam Quoc Dan Dang [a nationalist and anticommunist political party]
VNSF	[South] Vietnam Special Forces
VVL	Vietnam Veterans' League

INTRODUCTION

To Build a Nation

After seventy-one years of colonial rule in Vietnam—the principal component of French Indochina—the communist-led Viet Minh defeated the French Expeditionary Corps at Dien Bien Phu in May 1954. The Viet Minh, created by Ho Chi Minh in 1941, had led Vietnamese resistance to the World War II Japanese occupation forces and their captive Vichy French regime. On 16 August 1945, two days after V-J Day, Ho's forces occupied Hanoi, Vietnam's northern capital. A week later, Bao Dai, the hereditary emperor maintained as a figurehead by the French, abdicated in favor of the Viet Minh and their Democratic Republic of Vietnam.¹

Paris rejected the Viet Minh claim to sovereignty and launched an effort to reclaim Vietnam. It reinforced the Expeditionary Corps while negotiating with Ho Chi Minh to retain economic privileges in North Vietnam and effective sovereignty over Cochinchina, its colony in the South. Despite Viet Minh concessions, open warfare erupted in the North in November 1946.

Many U.S. officials recognized the Viet Minh's near-monopoly of organized nationalist and anticolonial sentiment—both communist and noncommunist—in Vietnam. Even before the Japanese surrender, Ho Chi Minh had used his contacts in the Office of Strategic Services to angle for U.S. support of Vietnamese independence. But as the Soviets absorbed Eastern Europe, U.S. policy makers worried more about reviving a prostrate France than about self-determination for a Vietnam led by professed communists. This meant indulging the enduring French obsession with empire, and in 1950 the United States began bankrolling the French military campaign in Indochina with an investment that reached some \$3 billion over the following four years.

Incompetent political and military leadership serving anachronistic colo-

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nial ambition doomed the French to failure. But by 1954, as the French forces prepared to draw the Viet Minh into a showdown battle, the recent communist victory in China and the trauma of the Korean War had made Washington fearful that any further communist expansion might trigger an accelerating disaster for the free world position in Asia. This “domino theory” led the United States to accept the burden of replacing the French, after their humiliating defeat at Dien Bien Phu, as the guarantor of a noncommunist Vietnam.

Even after Dien Bien Phu, the French maintained a hold on Cochin China, which the Viet Minh were not yet in a position to challenge by force. Multinational negotiations at Geneva after Dien Bien Phu reflected this standoff, and resulted in the division of the country at the 17th parallel into almost equal parts.

The Geneva Accords specified that unification elections were to take place in 1956; meanwhile, the Southern rump state had to have a leader. The United States accepted for this role a nationalist politician named Ngo Dinh Diem, a bitterly anticommunist Catholic from Central Vietnam. The French acceded, though only grudgingly—Diem was almost as Francophobe as he was anti-communist—and the new prime minister took office in July 1954.

The U.S. commitment sprang not from any perception of political vitality in the new government but from the sense that communist expansion must be resisted no matter how long the odds. Diem’s resources were so few and his opponents so numerous that many, even among his U.S. sponsors, anticipated a speedy Viet Minh victory. His antagonists included intransigent elements of the local French and their Vietnamese allies; the armed Hoa Hao and Cao Dai religious sects, ambitious to maintain their enclaves in Cochin China; and the Binh Xuyen bandit gang, which controlled not only commercial vice in Saigon but also the municipal police force. In addition, until 1955 the French maintained their hold on the army and the national treasury. Diem had no political base outside a modest following in Central Vietnam, and he had been a voluntary exile from Vietnam for the last several years before his ascension to office. His assets consisted of an iron will, U.S. support, the loyalty of the Catholic minority, and the temporary quiescence of the Southern communist organization, some 90,000 of whose activists were about to be regrouped to the North.

It was in these circumstances that the Central Intelligence Agency began to develop the first of the programs that eventually became the core of the U.S.–supported pacification campaign in South Vietnam. These initiatives arose almost exclusively in Saigon, where successive chiefs of station and their officers in the field took the lead in articulating responses to communist inroads on



Administrative map of South Vietnam, showing provincial boundaries as of 1967.

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the peasantry. The headquarters role in shaping program content never went beyond commentary on station proposals and reporting; its only innovation, in late 1966, dealt with the measurement of program results. My account of the CIA pacification programs therefore adopts a field perspective, not only to describe the programs and their effect but also to illuminate agency assumptions about the nature of the insurgency and about the means best suited to counter it.

If, as the record suggests, the agency understood the insurgency little better than did the rest of the U.S. government, its tactical responses reflected at least a partial grasp of the rural conditions and peasant mentality that sometimes belied the terms of its own formal assumptions. But this pragmatic spirit could not entirely compensate for the failure to resolve several key questions. Did the rural population need to be mobilized against an abhorred alien presence that the peasants lacked only the means to expel? Or was the government of Vietnam (GVN) confronting a political movement whose vitality allowed it to mobilize the same villagers whom the Saigon regime sought merely to quarantine from it? Or did the villagers simply wish a pox on both houses, as many American and GVN officials believed? That no single answer was likely to apply to the entire population, at any given moment, complicated these questions to the point that they were seldom explicitly asked.

Nevertheless, despite inconsistent perceptions of the insurgency and of peasant attitudes toward the communists and the Saigon government, CIA officers at the working level did take into account the effects of GVN incompetence and abuses on peasant loyalties. One of the purposes here is to describe the flexible, utilitarian approach that permitted CIA, along with its Vietnamese and American partners, to achieve important local successes in unpromising circumstances.

The operational records and the interviews with serving and retired agency officers that constitute the main sources for this book recall some of the atmosphere in which agency officers toiled in Vietnam. Most officers who served there had no previous experience of third world insurgency, and many of us, especially in the provinces, found ourselves facing challenges and exercising discretionary authority at a level well above the norm for our rank and experience.

The focus on the CIA role in rural pacification in Vietnam reflects no lack of respect for the contributions of the other American agencies that participated in the effort. The military and economic aid programs, in particular, provided nearly all the material resources for the defense and physical development of GVN-controlled areas. The Military Assistance Command, Vietnam

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(MACV) and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) also made massive efforts to improve the skills and motivation of the GVN military and civilian components charged with rural security and administration.

But the fact remains that CIA provided most of the conceptual and organizational innovation. It did not, to be sure, fully understand what it was up against. But its freedom from the constraints of institutional doctrine and its pragmatic management style earned it the de facto leadership of the U.S. effort to find a successful pacification formula. The centrality of this role gives the agency experience its value as the basis for an interpretation of the outcome.

The chronology of CIA involvement comprises six periods, each of which represents a qualitative change in the way in which the agency and the U.S. government approached rural pacification in South Vietnam.

In the first two years of Ngo Dinh Diem's administration, from 1954 to 1956, there were two autonomous CIA stations, an unorthodox "military" one led by Colonel Edward Lansdale and reporting directly to Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) Allen Dulles, and a more conventional "regular" station managed successively by two career officers of the Plans Directorate's Far East Division. Lansdale's military station led a drive to establish military and civilian civic action programs to compensate for the absence of an effective government presence in the countryside. The regular station began experimenting with a political front organization as the instrument of rural political mobilization. Diem, who tolerated if he did not always welcome these initiatives, set the tone of his own approach to rural pacification with a campaign of repression against the Viet Minh that indiscriminately targeted both communist and noncommunist adherents.

Diem's intractability and the dissolution of Lansdale's station in late 1956 led to the second period, a time of sharply reduced agency engagement that lasted until 1961. During this period, Diem nearly destroyed the communist organization in the countryside. But in so doing he also "dried the grass," as the Maoists liked to describe the process of peasant alienation, and the armed insurgency authorized by Hanoi in 1959 severely weakened Saigon's hold on its rural constituency.

The new Kennedy administration met expanding insurgency in Vietnam with a new investment of military and economic aid and with an eagerness to test current theories of counterinsurgency. In this third period, which ran from early 1961 to late 1963, the agency responded by launching a series of programs designed either to stimulate village self-defense or to attack the insurgent organization at the village level. It also encouraged the Strategic Hamlet

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program, which became the core of President Diem's pacification strategy until his demise in the coup d'état of November 1963.

In the fourth period, from late 1963 through 1965, as the South Vietnamese generals competed for power in Saigon, the agency worked at the provincial level, experimenting with variations on earlier programs in the search for a pacification formula. As before, it emphasized village self-defense, local political organization, and an attack on the communist political and administrative apparatus.

The Johnson administration ordered a massive expansion of the pacification effort, and in early 1966 the agency programs became the basis of the U.S. pacification strategy. The salient features of this fifth period, which lasted until 1969, were unified program management under MACV and the integration of intelligence and action programs in the countryside.

With the Nixon administration came Vietnamization, the effort to substitute indigenous management for American leadership. This sixth and final period (1969–1975) saw the gradual decay of the CIA-sponsored pacification programs, as the Vietnamese elected not to invest in them the energy and resources that the Americans were now withdrawing. The efforts to attract rural loyalty were the first to go, followed by the deterioration of the centralized intelligence attack, commonly known as Phoenix, against the communist political apparatus.

After the departure of U.S. ground forces and the subsequent withdrawal of combat air support, the Saigon government could survive without active peasant support only as long as Hanoi postponed a decisive reprise of its countrywide Easter offensive in 1972. The ultimate failure of the pacification effort contributed directly to the GVN's sudden collapse under the weight of the North Vietnamese general offensive of 1975.

CHAPTER 1

“The Effort Must Be Made”

Sometime in late 1954, Paul Harwood, the chief of covert action in CIA's regular Saigon Station, traveled in a military convoy to a Mekong Delta province capital, Vinh Long. This was the seat of a Catholic diocese headed by Bishop Ngo Dinh Thuc, a brother of Prime Minister Ngo Dinh Diem, and the visitors were attending the baptism of the child of a third brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu. Another guest was Tran Trung Dung, the assistant defense minister.¹ At one point Harwood asked Dung about the government's control of the countryside. “As long as we're here it's this far,” the minister replied, “but when we go back to Saigon it goes back with us.” Harwood asked if there were no district administrators, no “people who take care of the roads, or anything else?” “No, the French didn't leave us anything. . . . Our problem right now is not trying to keep the Viet Minh from taking over our area, but to take it over before they do. . . . [Of course,] we can't go about this thing in the same way [as the French] because this is our country, we can't operate as an army of occupation. But . . . trying to develop political and social programs with any impact . . . in an unadministered territory where you have a hostile population which is armed and ready to go against you—how do you do it?”²

Other observers were asking the same question. John Caswell, then chief of CIA's Vietnam desk, later recalled the atmosphere of despair at CIA Headquarters as Diem took office in July 1954. Caswell thought the Viet Minh would be in charge by 1956. Ngo Dinh Nhu was scarcely more hopeful when he told Paul Harwood in late July that despite all the obstacles, Diem refused to give up the fight to consolidate his government. Reporting this to headquarters, Harwood commented bleakly that the “task is hopeless, but [the] effort must be made.”³

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This pessimism reflected more the fragility of the new regime than it did any immediate threat from the communists. The terms of the Geneva Accords, signed in July 1954 just after Diem took office, called for the repatriation of adherents of both sides, and the Viet Minh were busy preparing to evacuate some 90,000 activists to North Vietnam. In September, Hanoi ordered some Communist Party organizations—of peasants and women, for example—disbanded, while party organs themselves, plus labor and youth groups, went underground. All of these were to be replaced by front organizations ostensibly devoted to various economic and social programs. Meanwhile, weapons were to be cached and military forces dispersed or hidden in secure bases.⁴

In these circumstances, the communists presented no organized opposition, projecting instead an almost beneficent image. Before the fiercely anticommunist commentator Joseph Alsop visited the Viet Minh-controlled Camau peninsula, he “could hardly imagine a communist government that was also a popular government and almost a democratic government.” But when he traveled there in December 1954 to see Viet Minh evacuation preparations, he found that “this was just the sort of government the palm-hut state actually was while the struggle with the French continued.”⁵

However deceptive the appearances that greeted Alsop in Camau, the immediate threat to the new Saigon government came from the local French, who—unlike the government in Paris—had not absorbed the lesson of Dien Bien Phu. They intended either to make Diem a front for continued French domination in the South or to force his resignation. To this end, they encouraged two armed religious sects—the Hoa Hao and the Cao Dai—and a bandit gang called the Binh Xuyen to contest Diem’s authority.⁶

Residual colonial ambition and a quiescent Viet Minh meant that during most of his first year in office, Diem concentrated on coping with the French and their surrogates. His CIA advisers and Nhu perforce did likewise. But despite their hostility to the French, Diem and Nhu never saw the anticolonial struggle as anything but a prelude to a final showdown with the communists. In addition to the ideological opposition dictated by their deep commitment to Catholicism, they would never forgive the Viet Minh’s murder of their eldest brother during the war with the French. Diem and Nhu were thus of one mind with each other and with their American contacts on the locus of the essential challenge.⁷

In one major respect, Diem’s perspective differed from that of both Nhu and the brothers’ CIA contacts. Like most of his senior U.S. military advisers, Diem saw the principal communist threat in terms of an invasion from the North; the resident Viet Minh organization could be dealt with, he thought,

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by a combination of police action and propaganda. For the prime minister, to engage the army against the internal enemy was to distract it from its essential mission, and to appeal for the support of the citizenry was to demean the ruler's person and his office. Nhu, by contrast, displayed relatively liberal impulses that for a time suggested the possibility of working with his American contacts to find ways to attract peasant loyalty.⁸

Two CIA Voices in Saigon

Of the U.S. officials with direct access to the presidential palace during Diem's first year, only CIA officers were actively concerned with helping the new government to establish its legitimacy in the countryside. Their advice was not, as it happened, always consistent, for there were two autonomous CIA stations in Saigon, and they adopted different approaches to consolidating the government's authority over its rural constituency. What may be called the regular station, headed by Emmett McCarthy, dealt with Diem's younger brother and close adviser Nhu. Paul Harwood, this station's covert action chief, responded to headquarters' urging by supporting Nhu's efforts to build a centralized political organization extending down to the provincial level.⁹

The other station, called the Saigon Military Mission (SMM) and headed by Air Force colonel Edward Lansdale, reflected the confidence of DCI Allen Dulles that CIA could play a decisive role in combating communist exploitation of third world revolutionary potential. The prelude to Lansdale's Saigon assignment was a tour of duty in Manila, where he represented the DCI as adviser to Ramon Magsaysay, who became secretary of national defense in 1950 and president in 1953. The Dulles brothers credited Lansdale with originating many of the stratagems that Magsaysay used to put down the nominally communist-led Huk rebellion in central Luzon. Seeing similar insurgent potential in Vietnam, Dulles sent Lansdale to Saigon in June 1954.¹⁰

There was no discoverable reason not to subordinate Lansdale to the DCI's representative in Vietnam, Emmett McCarthy. Allen Dulles seems simply to have regarded Lansdale as his personal agent in matters of third world instability, and to have given him the corresponding autonomy without much thought to the implications for orderly organizational process. The result was an anomalous status for Lansdale, who began his tour as an assistant air attaché at the embassy even as the members of his station began arriving with ostensible assignments to the Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG). Other results included a tense relationship between

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the two stations and an opportunity for perceptive Vietnamese to play one off against the other.¹¹

Allen Dulles had instructed Lansdale to “find another Magsaysay”—a charismatic leader who could accomplish for South Vietnam what had just been achieved in the Philippines. But Lansdale had hardly learned his way around Saigon when the leadership question was settled with the appointment of Ngo Dinh Diem by the absentee figurehead emperor, Bao Dai. In characteristically uninhibited style, Lansdale inveigled U.S. ambassador Donald Heath into introducing him to Diem as an informal adviser, and on 12 July Lansdale presented a plan that called for, among other things, the “emergency adoption” of a Philippine-style constitution.¹²

Meanwhile, waiting for the rest of his officers to arrive, Lansdale noted the paucity of government resources in the countryside, where he expected the Viet Minh eventually to compete with the government. Some 80 percent of the civil service lived in Saigon, with most of the remainder in provincial capitals. The bureaucracy was, in any case, almost inert, for the colonial regime had accelerated the decline of a decaying Vietnamese mandarin and produced a civil service whose main impulse was to preserve itself while serving its French masters.¹³

Hoping to inject some energy into this colonial relic, Lansdale called for joint activity by the Ministries of Social Action, Information, and Public Health, as well as by army psychological warfare units. He invited representatives from each to confer at his house, and a working committee emerged from these sessions that a young lieutenant, Rufus Phillips, escorted to the Philippines in October to inspect civic action operations there. The trip seemed to overcome, at least among committee members, the “bitter contention” between army and civil government that Lansdale saw as typical of South Vietnam, but concrete results did not immediately follow. This would have been too much to expect, as the personal bonding encouraged by Lansdale’s séances and by the trip to Manila could hardly by itself erase the parochial mores of the contending agencies.¹⁴

During his service in the Philippines, Lansdale had supported Magsaysay’s use of combat units both for repressive action against the insurgent hard core and for civic action designed to convert the less deeply committed among dissident peasantry. In Saigon, he quickly came to see the same potential in the Vietnamese Army. With almost none of the civil bureaucracy in direct touch with the peasantry, the army constituted the only organ of government with a widespread rural presence. Furthermore, having participated in combat against the Viet Minh, it offered a relatively high level of discipline and competence. The problem was the army’s tradition of abusing the peasantry,

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something Lansdale had also faced in the Philippines. In midsummer 1954, with only two people in his embryonic station, there was little Lansdale could do even to try to promote the reforms necessary to exploit the army's civic action potential.¹⁵

Personnel trickled in during the following weeks—there were thirteen by mid-August—and by early November staffing of the SMM permitted Lansdale to commission a survey of Vietnamese Army activity in the Mekong Delta. Near Soc Trang, someone discovered a battalion commander who on his own initiative had adopted the practices that Lansdale wanted to instill in the army as a whole. Disciplined and courteous troops had built a school and were conducting classes for local children. The local marketplace and church had been rebuilt, and the army was maintaining suggestion boxes to encourage the villagers to express complaints and desires and to volunteer information on the Viet Minh. Encouraged by this spontaneous application of his prescription for military civic action, Lansdale persuaded Diem first to visit the Soc Trang site and then to make the army responsible for occupying the areas being vacated by the Viet Minh.¹⁶

While Lansdale looked for ways to make a rule out of the Soc Trang exception, the regular station too adopted an existing rural security program. Although Lansdale had the primary charter for constituency building in the countryside, Paul Harwood also had a covert action mandate. Nhu was aware of this, and asked for help to continue a hamlet militia organization originally created by the French to fight the Viet Minh. With the end of French assistance, Nhu had to find new sources of support, and in the summer of 1954, Harwood began a subsidy to supplement the funds that Nhu had apparently found elsewhere. The station had no independent means of monitoring results, but Nhu seemed happy with a program that he undoubtedly directed as much against the sects as against the Viet Minh. By the end of the year, it had some 15,000 men under arms.¹⁷

The program attracted Lansdale's attention, and this produced an early eruption of competition between the stations. In September 1954, Chief of Station Emmett McCarthy, Harwood's boss, sent an angry cable demanding that headquarters instruct Lansdale to cease meddling with the militia. The argument turned moot when Ambassador J. Lawton Collins, who arrived in November, instructed Harwood to dissolve it. Sharing Diem's preoccupation with building an army to defend against invasion from the North, Collins was in any case unsympathetic to irregular military formations. When Harwood reminded him that the militia belonged to the GVN, not to CIA, Collins responded by ordering Harwood to cancel the agency subsidy.¹⁸

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The Saigon Military Mission and Rural Counterinsurgency

The end of CIA participation in the militia program left it to Lansdale and the SMM, for the moment, to represent CIA in the field of rural pacification. Lansdale took up the challenge with two initiatives aimed at increasing the level of foreign participation. First, he arranged for CIA-financed assistance that purported to be the contribution of a sympathetic neighboring country. Second, he worked to obtain formal U.S. military support for the Vietnamese Army's pacification efforts. Meanwhile, Lansdale indulged his proclivity to bypass conventional bureaucracy when he encouraged the prime minister to set up a civilian civic action office answering directly to the palace.¹⁹

Ed Lansdale's early efforts reflected an enduring impulse to employ his Philippine experience and his Filipino contacts in his work in Vietnam. The first project began to take shape in June 1954, when Oscar Arellano, the Filipino vice president for Southeast Asia of the Junior Chamber of Commerce International, visited Lansdale in Saigon. They discussed assigning a Philippine medical team to care for the Catholic refugees Lansdale expected to stream in from the North. The result was Operation Brotherhood (OB), whose Filipino doctors and nurses set up their first clinic at Bien Hoa, near Saigon, in October. Here, the OB doctors and nurses trained Vietnamese personnel while treating the arriving refugees. Once OB was established as a refugee relief program, its expansion into rural pacification awaited only the emergence of an appropriate governmental sponsor.²⁰

Such sponsorship was shortly to appear in the form of the Vietnamese Army. But a formal pacification role for the army would succeed only if Lansdale could achieve his second objective by getting the U.S. military to support the program. The opportunity to win this support arrived with a requirement from MAAG chief Major General John "Iron Mike" O'Daniel for a plan for the Army of the Republic of South Vietnam (ARVN) to occupy the areas controlled by the Viet Minh and the sects. Lansdale volunteered to write it and used the occasion to emphasize how the army could generate popular acceptance through benevolent treatment of the villagers. To assure army control where it was needed, Lansdale's plan divided the country into three zones, giving the army full authority in pacification areas. The military would share authority with the civilian administration in the second zone, considered to be in a process of transition, and would be excluded in the third, wherever pacification was deemed complete.²¹

General O'Daniel approved the plan, and Lansdale presented it to Diem, who made only minor changes before adopting it on 31 December 1954 as the

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GVN's National Security Action (Pacification) Directive. Wanting to ensure his control of implementation, Lansdale then persuaded O'Daniel to make him chief of the National Security Division, the new MAAG unit charged with pacification support. This put him in charge of implementing what he had just designed, and incidentally gave official status to his supervision of his new personnel there. From his new position in MAAG, Lansdale then lobbied Ambassador Collins to name him coordinator of all U.S. Mission activity, civilian as well as military, supporting rural pacification. In early January 1955, Collins agreed. This virtuoso manipulation of the Vietnamese and U.S. bureaucracies by the self-proclaimed antibureaucrat had taken Lansdale less than six weeks.²²

The 1950 agreement that established a U.S. military advisory mission in Vietnam had limited its work to logistic support of an army trained and commanded by the French. Lansdale's maneuvers to have the SMM put in charge of pacification support thus depended for their practical effect on direct American access to the Vietnamese for training purposes. In January 1955, as it happened, General O'Daniel was completing an agreement with General Paul Ely, commanding the residual French Expeditionary Corps, to allow for such U.S. participation. This arrangement justified Lansdale's new mandate, but it also required a French presence in his National Security Division. As Lansdale saw it, the French chose his unit as a refuge for their intelligence and security officers. Although he absolved Ely of any malign intent, he spared few of the general's subordinates when he reported to Allen Dulles how the French spied on their U.S. counterparts and tried to sabotage their efforts on behalf of Ngo Dinh Diem.²³

But Lansdale had direct access to Diem, and his French antagonists did not. He exploited it by persuading Diem to adopt still another feature of his experience in the Philippines, a civilian office complementing the army's civic action. Diem named Kieu Cong Cung, an energetic former Viet Minh, to run the new program, which he charged with mobilizing the civilian resources to be deployed in pacification operations.²⁴

Lansdale introduced Cung to the economic aid and information officers of the embassy, and Cung incorporated their suggestions into a plan based on French pacification practice. The core of that plan was an idea borrowed from the so-called French Mobile Administrative Group and modified to reflect American experience in the Philippines. It called for a small coordinating group in Saigon to send “trained government employees into the provinces to set up a government at the village level and connect it to the national government.” The objective was to reach into villages that had been ignored by the colonial

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administration and were now, Lansdale thought, often “dominated by secret Viet Minh cadres.”²⁵

Diem’s defense minister, Ho Thong Minh, convoked civilian and military authorities from provincial and regional levels to explain the program. These officials saw nothing wrong with military civic action, but they reacted to Lansdale’s proposal to deploy civilian teams “with a storm of protest.” They saw in it an effort by Diem to dilute their authority, and Lansdale acknowledged that the U.S. Country Team—the local heads of the agencies represented in Saigon—saw the same danger. Diem and Minh pressed on, to Lansdale’s evident satisfaction, but the resistance forced a compromise that put the teams’ activities under provincial jurisdiction. The resulting scheme thus appointed as working-level supervisors the very people whose ineffectiveness the program was designed to circumvent. Despite these obstacles, training began, and the first teams were dispatched in March 1955 to support the army’s occupation of Viet Minh-controlled areas under the terms of the Geneva Accords.²⁶

Military Occupation of Viet Minh Zones

At this point, the first military civic action operation had already begun. Operation Liberty, launched into the southern Camau peninsula on 8 February, took place with logistical support from Lansdale, but with almost none of his people with troops in the field. Sensitive to the risk that the operation might look like a foreign-sponsored enterprise, the Vietnamese had asked for a minimal MAAG presence, and Lansdale allowed only one of his officers, Lieutenant Rufus Phillips, in civilian clothes, to accompany the army units moving south from Soc Trang.²⁷

The local commander was Colonel Duc, presumably the same officer whose own civic action program had attracted SMM attention in November. Phillips judged that Duc had a fair idea of what he wanted to do but lacked support from army headquarters, which was treating the operation as “just another military occupation.” Phillips went ahead, helping Duc’s staff indoctrinate representatives of the participating units in civic action precepts; these men then returned to their units to pass the word. This informal procedure seems to have worked, with the units it reached, and the Filipinos’ Operation Brotherhood did its part, setting up clinics along the army’s route of advance. But some army units were assigned to the operation only at the last moment and failed to get the SMM indoctrination. Their subsequent depredations nullified much of the effect of the courtesy displayed by forces adequately prepared.²⁸

Lansdale’s station busied itself also with the interagency logistics of the

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operation. It worked with government agencies like the U.S. Information Service (USIS) and the economic aid office of the International Cooperation Administration (ICA, a predecessor to USAID), as well as with charitable organizations such as CARE, to remedy shortages ranging from medical and sewing supplies to road-building equipment. David Smith, Lansdale’s man with Operation Brotherhood, heard that the French still had custody of U.S.–supplied army field hospitals intended for the Vietnamese Army. Anticipating that the French would ship them out for their own use, he called on the French logistics officer to get one for OB. Unsure even that his fractured French was being understood, Smith persisted until the exasperated Frenchman got rid of him by inviting him to take whatever he wanted. So Smith packed up two hospitals, lacking the transportation to carry away any more.²⁹

Always eager to get Diem personally involved with his people, Lansdale organized a trip to the pacification area. He later judged the visit a success, at least with respect to Diem’s performance. But Lansdale sensed too much of an army-of-occupation approach to be optimistic about the net effect; it appeared that the anxiety on this point earlier expressed by Tran Trung Dung was well founded. When the operation ended, Lansdale noted without elaborating that there was evidence of the continued presence of Viet Minh political cadres.³⁰

The focus shifted to the north, where Saigon’s troops were to replace the Viet Minh administration in an area of Central Vietnam composed of southern Quang Ngai and northern Binh Dinh provinces. The Vietnamese Army high command named Colonel Le Van Kim, regarded by Lansdale as probably the most capable staff officer in the Vietnamese Army, to lead Operation Giai Phong (Breaking of Slave Shackles). However capable, Kim was also a member of the Francophile establishment, and Diem, suspicious as always of anyone with ties to the French, hesitated to confirm the assignment. Lansdale later said he had hastened to reassure Diem with a promise that Phillips would “monitor the operation.” Lansdale accompanied this with a homily on leadership, telling Diem that he should summon Colonel Kim, refer to his history of French affiliations, and appeal to his patriotism as the Vietnamese commander of an operation “vital to the nation.” This, Lansdale continued, would be “real leadership and Diem was the leader of his people and must demonstrate it to them. He took the advice.”³¹

Finally confirmed as its commander, Colonel Kim launched Operation Giai Phong on 22 April. Once again, Rufus Phillips was the only American on the scene. Despite the area’s reputation as a communist stronghold since the 1930s, the reception that Kim’s troops enjoyed there persuaded Phillips that a government demonstrating benevolent purposes would be welcomed. Phillips

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detected signs of skepticism among the troops, but their reception by the villagers encouraged them to extend a more unreserved cooperation, and this in turn sparked more displays of popular enthusiasm. As the operation proceeded outward from Qui Nhon, the Binh Dinh capital, army engineers replaced bridges destroyed by the Viet Minh and filled in the sawtooth trenches dug by the villagers at Viet Minh direction. Tips began to come in about clandestine Viet Minh cadres left behind, and villagers led the advancing troops to communist arms caches.³²

In his two months with the operation, Phillips heard of no untoward incidents involving government forces; petty obstructionism from the accompanying French was the only problem, which Phillips and Kim neutralized by meeting privately when they had decisions to make. The Camau operation had not produced such uniformly gratifying results, and Phillips thought that better-prepared government troops were only part of the reason. The departing Viet Minh forces had taken with them a levy of young men, estimated at 20,000 for the entire South. Phillips saw this conscription as generating peasant resentment, despite the promise that all would return in 1956, after the reunification elections mandated by the Geneva Accords. In addition, Central Vietnam harbored more national feeling than the Mekong Delta. Interviewing villagers, Phillips found that they knew of Diem and his record of opposition to the French. The prime minister visited Qui Nhon on 27 May, and Phillips witnessed his triumphal reception, sparked by a bear hug from a Filipino Operation Brotherhood worker and a ride on the shoulders of several enthusiastic residents.³³

Victory in Saigon, Interregnum in the Countryside

But it was too late, in the spring of 1955, to persuade Ambassador J. Lawton Collins that Diem might after all have the potential to win popular loyalty. Influenced by French antipathy to Diem and by persistent Vietnamese factionalism in Saigon, Collins had decided that Diem was not the man to prevent an eventual communist victory. On 20 April 1955, two days before the launching of Operation Gai Phong, Collins flew to Washington, where he persuaded President Eisenhower and a reluctant Secretary of State Dulles to begin looking for a replacement.³⁴

On 30 April, with Collins still in Washington, Diem defied French and American pressure when he ordered army units in Saigon to return mortar fire coming from the Binh Xuyen gang, which controlled commercial vice in Saigon, and its confederates in the National Police. The poorly disciplined bandits

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soon fled into the mangrove swamps south of Saigon. Their erstwhile allies in the armed Hoa Hao and Cao Dai sects, some of whose leaders Ngo Dinh Nhu and CIA had already suborned, stood aside.³⁵

Lansdale was at Diem's side throughout the episode, and Harwood maintained nearly continuous communication with Nhu. Together, the two CIA officers provided a blow-by-blow account of Diem's summary handling of the rebels. Both stations urged headquarters to view the victory as confirming Diem's stature as the only Vietnamese leader with any hope of uniting the South and prevailing over the Viet Minh. This combination of information and advocacy, the most fateful application ever of CIA influence on U.S. policy toward Vietnam, prompted President Eisenhower to revoke his promise to Collins to withdraw the U.S. commitment to Diem. The administration's unconditional support of Diem gave Paris an incentive to accelerate its withdrawal, and by late summer 1955, the last combat units of the French Expeditionary Corps had departed. Without French support, the resistance of the sects and the Binh Xuyen soon withered.³⁶

Operation Giai Phong continued in the wake of Diem's victory over the Binh Xuyen. Rufus Phillips, accompanying the army in Central Vietnam, thought the people there were beginning to see that Diem, by subduing the sects and forcing the exit of the French, had succeeded in doing what “not even Ho” had done. To Phillips, the military regime in Binh Dinh and Phu Yen looked equitable and genuinely popular. But there existed no civilian administration to take its place. Later in the year, Colonel Kim told Phillips that the provincial governments were still not ready to take over. Whether Kim made this case also to Diem is unknown, but he was unsuccessful if he did; the prime minister did restore civilian authority, and the army's successes began to erode.³⁷

Visiting Saigon at the end of 1955, Phillips marveled at the divergence between his own impression and the prevailing view in the embassy. People not directly exposed to the vacuum in the countryside seemed to assume that Diem ran a functioning government whose writ extended down through province to the district level. Except where well-led army units were deployed, Phillips saw essentially the same situation Paul Harwood had seen in Vinh Long in late 1954. The people might be disposed to accept Diem's leadership, but without an effective local administration to represent him, his authority was empty.³⁸

In May 1955, Lansdale began trying to elicit information from the MAAG's Vietnamese Army contacts on postrepatriation Viet Minh activity south of the 17th parallel. The results persuaded him that communist paramilitary organizations were scattered across the foothills and the Central Highlands of Central Vietnam, and in the swamps of the Plain of Reeds. These and smaller

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groups of cadres in the populated areas of the Delta now exerted what Lansdale described as growing “secret political control,” anticipating a Viet Minh victory in the all-Vietnam elections mandated by the Geneva Accords for July 1956. When necessary, they were also, in Lansdale’s understanding, “using small-scale terrorism to bring village elders into line.” At this point, Vietnamese Army Headquarters estimated the total number of clandestine Viet Minh cadres in South Vietnam at 10,000.³⁹

Lansdale’s reaction was to support the accelerated deployment of Kieu Cong Cung’s civic action workers to connect the GVN with the villagers in Delta provinces such as Kien Hoa and Go Cong. On 7 May 1955, Diem acceded to Lansdale’s urging when he created the Civic Action Commission, with Commissioner Cung reporting directly to the palace. Lansdale then shifted his focus to the embassy’s Country Team, where he solicited support from its various members, especially USIS and the economic aid mission, ICA. By the middle of June, eleven civilian civic action teams had begun assignments in provinces outside the zones administered by the army. At a Country Team meeting in late September, Lansdale persuaded USIS to commit three-fourths of its operating budget to support the civic action program’s public information efforts. He was less successful with ICA, which worried that diverting resources to the informal civic action entity would dilute its program of aid to Diem’s line ministries.⁴⁰

Perhaps unaware of this ambivalent reaction from the Country Team, Diem encouraged Cung’s efforts. By October 1955 there were forty-six teams, some still in training and the others scattered among twenty-five provinces. Surviving reports from Lansdale do not describe the effect of their work, but a Defense Department historian described their practice of the “Three Withs” motto: eat with, sleep with, and work with the people. Dressed like the villagers, they were to conduct censuses and surveys, build hospitals and schools, and undertake road repairs, well digging, teaching, and other such services. But they were all city folk, and it is perhaps a lack of empathy with the peasants that accounts for the historian’s conclusion that in general the program enjoyed little success in generating peasant enthusiasm for the GVN.⁴¹

The paucity of American support may have helped to limit the development of whatever potential the civic action concept contained. By the fall of 1955, Lansdale regarded his catalytic role with civic action as essentially fulfilled. He wanted the ICA mission to take over, and finally got a hesitant commitment. But months passed with no action, and it was not until 1957 that the first material aid arrived, in the form of 25,000 pairs of sewing scissors.⁴²

Meanwhile, in the summer of 1955, the two stations joined in a rare coop-

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erative effort to create a role for CIA in U.S. training and support of the Civil Guard, a territorial defense force, and Saigon’s National Police. This ambitious proposal, aimed at assuring agency control of the intelligence, staybehind, and unconventional warfare potential in these organizations, encountered shortages of both qualified officers and cover positions for assignments in Saigon. Struggling to meet the stations’ demands for immediate action, headquarters found three officers to handle intelligence liaison with the Sûreté, the police intelligence arm.⁴³

At the same time, Lieutenant Colonel Gordon Jorgensen, an intelligence officer in World War II and now Lansdale’s deputy, was working at General O’Daniel’s direction to develop a plan for the Civil Guard. While the U.S. Country Team procrastinated over the draft plan, Jorgensen obtained a quota for Civil Guard officers at the Vietnamese Army’s leadership course. He sent twenty others to attend a brief course in Manila given by the counterpart organization there, the Philippine Constabulary. As in its support of civic action and Operation Brotherhood, the SMM saw its role here as that of honest broker, promoting communication within and between the Vietnamese and U.S. bureaucracies. Lacking executive authority over either, it achieved no lasting results, and it was not until 1966 that the U.S. Mission again tried to integrate, even on the American side, the programs aimed at expanding the GVN’s rural presence and reducing that of the communist-led insurgency.⁴⁴

Of all the SMM’s pacification initiatives, Operation Brotherhood was the most amenable to CIA control. The flexibility of agency logistic and financial procedures allowed for its rapid expansion, and by May 1955 more than 100 doctors and nurses were staffing ten medical centers across South Vietnam, training local staff and treating more than 2,000 patients a day. Lansdale viewed the services of OB as an indispensable part of the army operations that reoccupied Camau, in the far south, and parts of Phu Yen and Binh Dinh provinces in Central Vietnam. Although the political effects of such efforts were always almost impossible to measure, OB’s ministrations were undoubtedly well received. But as Lansdale and Phillips well understood, they could at best temporarily compensate for the inadequacy of the indigenous resources available to Ngo Dinh Diem.⁴⁵

A Try at Reform from Above

While Ed Lansdale was using his Filipinos to try to win the countryside for Ngo Dinh Diem, Paul Harwood pursued a parallel effort with Ngo Dinh Nhu to preempt the communists through the political mobilization of the peasantry.

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The instrument of this effort was a quasi-political party called the National Revolutionary Movement (NRM), launched in late 1954. Its grandiose title concealed its modest original purpose as a campaign mechanism to get Nhu's candidates elected to the constituent assembly that was to precede the 1956 elections. Harwood saw the shortage of leadership and administrative talent as foreclosing any more ambitious agenda, but headquarters, worried about the lack of a government presence in rural South Vietnam, urged the station in June 1955 to use the NRM to bridge "the present enormous gap between the Government and the people." The station should do this by having it offer a program of "political, social, and economic reform."⁴⁶

Harwood dutifully responded in the late summer of 1955 with a list of proposed reforms that included land redistribution, expanded public services, and the creation of democratic institutions. He and Nhu then worked to get Diem's agreement to the program, but in vain. Nhu criticized his brother to Harwood, deploring Diem's procrastination on land reform and on the "democratization and overhaul of the governmental administration, especially at the provincial level." Diem's intransigence and the leadership deficit combined to prevent the NRM from taking root, and, in Harwood's retrospective words, "we got nowhere."⁴⁷

CHAPTER 2

“Get Them before They Get Us”

If Paul Harwood was right, and the GVN had by mid-1955 got nowhere in establishing a civilian government presence in the countryside, the same could be said of the communists. No significant subversive or insurgent activity had yet surfaced, and from the American perspective rural political loyalties were still up for grabs. But Ngo Dinh Diem preferred to take popular loyalty for granted. He made no effort, after the army gave up authority in the former Viet Minh zones, to use his civilian ministries to ingratiate his regime with the peasantry. Nor did he ever act on the Harwood-Nhu reform proposals of mid-1955. As did many Americans, he regarded the Viet Minh as a communist cancer that only radical surgery could excise from an otherwise healthy body politic. With this philosophy, it was easy to believe, as Nhu said of Diem, that “to rule, it was enough to have an army and an administrative apparatus.”¹

The Anticommunist Denunciation Campaign

Accordingly, while Lansdale was busy with civic action and Harwood and Nhu were urging their reforms, the prime minister was preparing an assault on the principal, if momentarily quiescent, enemy. One instrument of this attack was the so-called Anticommunist Denunciation Campaign, which Diem’s information minister, Tran Chanh Thanh, launched in July 1955. It began with a demonstration against the International Control Commission, representing the Geneva signatories in Saigon, presumably in protest of its communist Polish member. The campaign soon evolved into a program of rallies and demonstrations, mainly in rural communities, at which the people were exhorted to abjure communism and denounce the Viet Minh agents among them.²

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Thanh, a former Viet Minh whom Harwood later recalled as legalistic, rigid, and xenophobic, borrowed extensively from communist technique and made such practices as communal self-criticism sessions a regular part of the program. This phase of the effort enjoyed the support of the U.S. Mission in the person of USIS chief George Hellyer, who wanted to help Thanh strip the Viet Minh of their nationalist mantle by emphasizing Diem's legitimacy and the treasonous character of any armed underground opposition.³

Before the end of 1955, the station had already concluded that Diem's reliance on ex-Viet Minh activists to run the denunciation program had infused into it a dangerously "totalitarian spirit." There were arbitrary arrests that Diem tolerated even if, as the station thought, he was not commissioning them. Harwood told Nhu in November that he recognized the lack of both capable people and a democratic tradition, but that he hoped "some thought [was] being given [to the] development of political leaders with more democratic ideas."⁴

How strenuously Nhu urged this line of argument on his brother is not known, and Diem, who declared himself president after a referendum in October 1955, proceeded to intensify the repressive character of the Anti-communist Denunciation Campaign. In January 1956, he promulgated Ordinance 6, which authorized detention and reeducation for anyone considered a danger to the state. At that point, according to his Information Ministry, 20,000 communists had been in detention camps since 1954. In May 1956, Information Minister Thanh claimed that the campaign had "entirely destroyed the predominant communist influence of the previous nine years." More than 94,000 Viet Minh had rallied to the GVN, he said, and 120,000 weapons had been recovered. Thanh's numbers were undoubtedly exaggerated, but they do suggest that the estimate of an underground organization of 10,000 members, used by most historians to the present day, was at best highly conservative.⁵

Thanh's exaggeration reflected in part the general GVN proclivity to label all political prisoners as communists, when in fact many were nationalist or sectarian noncommunists. Their precise numbers never emerged, but Lansdale took the claim of a Cao Dai contact seriously enough to report to headquarters that in early 1956 there were already 7,000 political detainees in Saigon's Chi Hoa prison. The GVN seems to have recognized the antipathy of its agency interlocutors toward indiscriminate repression, and to have kept its own counsel regarding its police campaign against suspected dissidents. Lansdale's man Rufus Phillips, for example, left in 1956 still under the impression that the campaign relied exclusively on exhortation and propaganda. Accusations of

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abuses later became more widespread, but even then, as Deputy Chief of Station (DCOS) Douglas Blaufarb recalled it, they “didn’t have much impact” on the station, whose officers, in liaison with the Sûreté, worked exclusively with the Vietnamese intelligence people who were trying to insert penetration agents into the insurgent organization.⁶

Ambivalence about Repression

Station officers visiting the countryside in 1956 occasionally encountered the Anticommunist Denunciation Campaign in action. Their reactions to it varied. In April, a member of Lansdale’s SMM visited Vinh Long, where he found civic action personnel working with the provincial staff of the Information Ministry. To him, the weekly mass meeting in this Delta province town seemed to be “popular with the citizens.”⁷

Putney Westerfield, an officer in the regular station, visited the same province two months later and came away with a different perspective. He listened to the province chief boast how he was “weeding out . . . untrustworthy types” in the provincial administration and deploying “special secret agents in disguise into the villages to root out the subversive types, whether they be communist Viet Cong or simply anti-administration malcontents.” The province chief praised the work of a visiting civic action team, but had no apparent plans to imitate it with local resources. Westerfield was struck by the ubiquity in Vinh Long of anti-Viet Cong propaganda and “gigantic pictures of Diem” hanging from government buildings. Nevertheless, despite all this display, he concluded that Nhu’s National Revolutionary Movement was moribund.⁸

Westerfield also visited Can Tho, a picturesque French colonial creation and capital of neighboring Phong Dinh Province. There, in contrast to Vinh Long, the NRM claimed 20,000 members, with cadres drawn from the ranks of merchants, teachers, and even peasants. NRM practice in Phong Dinh echoed Paul Harwood’s advice to Nhu, excluding military personnel and GVN administrators from membership. In addition, the organization was collecting some local membership dues and supplementing its propaganda activity with social services. Westerfield noted that it cooperated with the GVN in anticommunist agitation, but he thought it significant that NRM participation remained entirely distinct from the work of the official Vietnam Information Service.⁹

Case Officer Westerfield traveled at about the same time to the Binh Thuan province capital, Phan Thiet, on the South China Sea northeast of Saigon. There, it seemed to him, the Anticommunist Denunciation Campaign had dis-

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placed any impulse to launch constructive programs. The province chief, a man named Giai, said that pockets of communist strength remained, and that his job was to use all resources, including those of Nhu's political organization, the NRM, to find "the rascals and [put] them in jail where they belong."¹⁰

Giai was eager to defend this repressive strategy to his visitor. Well aware of American hostility to authoritarianism, he acknowledged that "perhaps you don't approve of everything we are trying to do. I want to emphasize that we are still in a crisis and we will remain in a crisis, and that we cannot cease our efforts until every man and woman in this province is ready to fight the communists." Giai listed a string of arrests of Viet Cong turned in by "the people," who now saw Saigon as offering more than the communists, but he deflected Westerfield's efforts to identify the programs they found attractive. The station officer was left wondering whether Giai really understood his constituents' preferences. Westerfield visited other provinces in the course of 1956. There, he found that the priority given to exposing presumed dissidents echoed the emphasis on repression in Binh Thuan and Vinh Long more than it did the more constructive approach being applied in Phong Dinh.¹¹

In Saigon, Paul Harwood found that his ambivalence about the Anticomunist Denunciation Campaign persisted. More worried in late 1955 that involvement in government abuses would compromise NRM integrity, by March 1956 he had come to see some merit in the movement's participation in the denunciations: identifying Viet Cong and other dissidents was, after all, part of the "civic duty" of all Vietnamese. But Harwood evidently still saw a countersubversive role as unsuited to a proto-political party, for he added that he saw its focus moving away from repression in favor of a new emphasis on social and economic development projects.¹²

Whatever the focus of NRM activity, it reflected the convictions of Ngo Dinh Nhu, influenced to some degree by Paul Harwood, and not those of the president. Essentially ignoring the NRM, Diem relied on the Information Ministry and the police to assert his authority in the countryside. In December 1956, he accused Mai Huu Xuan, the police general he had put in charge of an army pacification operation around Saigon, of failure to maintain its initial momentum. Diem complained to Chief of Station (COS) John Anderton, Emmett McCarthy's successor, that Xuan needed to understand how, with limited resources, he "must rely on speed and force rather than thoroughness." As had now become chronic, Diem and Lansdale's SMM were working here at cross purposes, for Rufus Phillips was encouraging Xuan to apply the military civic action techniques tested in the 1955 reoccupation of the Viet Minh zones. Xuan's response may have accounted for some of Diem's frustra-

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tion, for as far as Phillips could tell, his troops were comporting themselves impeccably.¹³

As Diem neared the end of his second year in office, both stations continued to see the creation of representative government as indispensable to his long-term success. But both, especially the regular station, also accepted a certain amount of repression as required to protect a fragile regime from its enemies. The implicit assumption seems to have been that a judicious level of repression would not compromise the nation-building program and might even be a prerequisite to its success. No one asked, it seems, whether the GVN could manage its repression in such a way as to keep the Viet Cong in check without generating self-defeating popular disaffection.

Diem would have treated the question as absurd, for he could never have accepted the possibility of adverse effects from a policy he considered necessary and right. To a headquarters officer with long experience in Vietnam, Diem's policy looked like a simple injunction to “get them before they get us.” The result was, in the words of Chester Cooper, another agency expert on Vietnam, “innumerable crimes and absolutely senseless acts of suppression against both real and suspected communists and sympathizing villagers. . . . Efficiency took the form of brutality and a total disregard for the difference between determined foes and potential friends.”¹⁴

Whether this rather overwrought language accurately reflects the scale of GVN repression is perhaps impossible to determine. Agency officers had at the time only occasional direct access to denunciation sessions and only anecdotal information on detentions and police harassment. The effect of that repression in driving former Viet Minh adherents back into opposition emerged later, when researchers for the Rand Corporation interviewed prisoners and ralliers (defectors from the Viet Cong movement) in the mid- to late 1960s. They found that, in Diem's early years in power, abuses were especially harsh in the Viet Minh areas initially taken over by Diem's army and then returned to civilian administration. In these localities, blackmail and arbitrary arrest soon became standard practice. In Saigon, by contrast, legal protections could be invoked, and the interviewers concluded that repression had been less severe there and in other urban areas.¹⁵

But even in the countryside, the damaging effect of repression on Diem's legitimacy was not evident in the spring of 1956, when Americans, including MAAG chief General O'Daniel and assorted visitors, were all touring the countryside without being shot at. Only in retrospect, as their contemporary Paul Harwood later put it, did they look like passengers strolling the decks of the stricken Titanic.¹⁶

The Mandarin Approach to Counterinsurgency

In June 1956, Diem sought to tighten his control of the peasantry by replacing locally elected village councils with committees appointed by his province and district chiefs. Obviously preferring not to provoke an argument with Lansdale, who had been urging him to increase the representative character of this institution, Diem acted without telling him. Lansdale had good reason to recommend reforms, for the village council, as restored by the French in the 1940s after a period of desuetude, did not at all resemble the egalitarian town meeting imagined by many of Diem's American admirers. On the contrary, it reinforced village isolation from the larger community while it preserved the holdings and authority of a quasi-feudal elite. Diem's imposition of Saigon's authority did not improve matters, for his officials appeared to the peasantry, as a Defense Department historian put it, like "civil bosses rather than civil servants." They could not, in any case, have expected a warm reception, because most of them were Northern Catholics, or city dwellers, or bore some other alien stigma.¹⁷

By mid-1956, the Anticomunist Denunciation Campaign had, however indiscriminately, inflicted serious damage on the communist underground and its noncommunist but anti-Diem allies in the sects and the Binh Xuyen. The communists might now hope for relief from this onslaught if the all-Vietnam elections mandated by the Geneva Accords were conducted on schedule, but Diem had already foreclosed this option. In February, he had already enlisted Lansdale to help persuade the United States to endorse his intended repudiation of the elections. Much of official Washington was already disposed to dispense with them, and with Lansdale having prepared the ground, Diem quickly won his point.¹⁸

The resulting prospect of protracted conflict combined with the decimation of communist cadres to convince some of the surviving Viet Minh that Hanoi's policy of "political struggle" would simply provoke Diem to exterminate what remained of the Southern apparatus. But Hanoi saw the time as not yet ripe to take up arms. In June, while Saigon was installing its police in the villages, the Politburo in Hanoi replied to its compatriots in the South with a resolution rejecting "armed struggle." Instead, it prescribed continued construction of mass organizations and the surreptitious development of military forces and secure bases. This decision, together with Diem's preference for repression over positive incentives, established the strategies that would define the conflict for the next three years.¹⁹

Although presumably not yet aware of the June policy decision in Hanoi,

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the U.S. intelligence community correctly read the accumulated indicators and concluded before the end of 1956 that subversion, not invasion, represented the main threat to the new Vietnamese state. This was cold comfort to those in Saigon who saw the regime as hanging by a thread, and when Paul Harwood departed in the spring, he left behind a tired, discouraged Ngo Dinh Nhu. There was still no real administrative apparatus in the countryside, and Nhu understood this; he seemed also to fear that Harwood’s replacement might think the GVN’s prospects too poor to justify continuing the energetic support that Harwood had rendered.²⁰

The GVN’s reliance on coercion confirmed the apprehensions of people like Putney Westerfield who had firsthand knowledge of the provinces, and who worried that repression had displaced the positive functions of government. In August 1956, Diem published GVN Ordinance 47, prescribing death for “any deed performed in or for any organization designated as communist.” This decree coincided with the gradual decline of Kieu Cong Cung’s civic action program, in which Lansdale had placed such high hopes. Always unpopular with Saigon’s line ministries, which saw it as a competitor, civic action was now turning into a subordinate arm of the Anticommunist Denunciation Campaign. An expendable arm, as it turned out: Diem lost interest in it and the GVN cut back the funding even of propaganda activity before the end of 1956.²¹

The End of the Saigon Military Mission

As of late 1956, CIA officers in Saigon still saw intimidating obstacles to consolidating the Diem regime’s authority over its rural constituency. But the improvisational stopgap approach that for more than two years had characterized the SMM’s contribution to Diem’s political survival had become obsolete. One of the chief SMM accomplishments, the Philippines-based Operation Brotherhood, may indeed have become the victim of its own success. GVN social agencies began to covet the material support the Americans were lavishing on the Filipinos, and tensions arose with the Taiwan OB contingent, which had come, also under Junior Chamber of Commerce auspices, to lend a multinational coloration to the project. In mid-1956, mindful of OB’s successes, DCI Allen Dulles resisted a recommendation that the time had come to terminate the program. But its work had in fact reached the point of diminishing returns, and Dulles finally acceded. The last team left Vietnam on 12 December 1956.²²

Lansdale and the Saigon Military Mission left with it. The SMM had always been regarded as a temporary expedient, designed to help Diem survive

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the near anarchy of the period that followed the Geneva Accords. The departure of the French and the taming of Diem's indigenous opposition meant that the SMM could be dissolved, with activities that still seemed to require American participation turned over to the regular CIA Station or to MAAG.²³

The largest of these activities was the Vietnam Veterans' League (VVL). The SMM had been working on this venture ever since December 1954, when Diem expressed concern about retaining the loyalty of soldiers about to be demobilized according to the restrictions on the army imposed at Geneva. Lansdale believed that a vigorous organization of ex-soldiers would preempt any communist or sectarian moves to recruit alienated veterans, and with Diem's approval he had brought in old Filipino contacts to help organize a Vietnamese version of the Philippine Veterans' League.²⁴

For reasons not now discoverable, the SMM put more emphasis on obtaining membership for the league in the World Veterans' Federation than it devoted to local proselyting. Recruitment prospects probably were further dimmed by Diem's insistence on installing the chief of his internal security organ, the former French Sûreté, as the group's president. In addition, the Philippine and American advisory effort apparently struck the Vietnamese as disconcertingly heavy-handed. Although Lansdale claimed 22,000 members for the league in mid-1956, local recruiting never met expectations. Two years later, headquarters terminated agency support.²⁵

When Lansdale left Saigon in December 1956, he took with him whatever modest capacity the United States had to persuade Ngo Dinh Diem of the need to win the consent of the governed. One potential influence, new MAAG chief Lieutenant General Samuel "Hangin' Sam" Williams, was impervious to the intelligence consensus on North Vietnamese intentions, concerning himself only with building the army into an effective barrier to invasion. In so doing, he reinforced Diem's antipathy, against which Lansdale had struggled, toward engaging the army in attracting peasant loyalty. Ambassador Frederick Reinhardt's charter, following General Collins's brief but stormy tenure, emphasized a cordial relationship with Diem. And Harwood's successor in the station, Douglas Blaufarb, found Ngo Dinh Nhu now preoccupied with such essentially urban activities as labor, NRM recruiting, and "cultural activities" aimed at the educated middle class.²⁶

The Illusion of Victory

Ngo Dinh Diem visited the United States in May 1957. Official Washington greeted him as a conquering hero, and the Congress invited him to address

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a joint session. In the American view, he had succeeded where even admirers expected him to fail. The Viet Cong were on the run, the dissident sect leaders could do no more than sulk, and GVN authority, generally seen by U.S. officials as no harsher than it needed to be, now extended deep into the countryside.²⁷

Some observers at CIA Headquarters were less uncritical, and DCI Dulles's agenda for his meeting with Diem included agency complaints about both the GVN and the U.S. Mission in Saigon. Headquarters officers were unhappy about Diem's failure to unify GVN intelligence collection and also about the embassy's procrastination on a coordinated counterinsurgency program. Dulles's staff wanted him to press the Vietnamese president for action on both matters—it appears that Diem was to be enlisted to reinforce CIA pressure on the embassy—but no record of their meeting survives.²⁸

If Dulles pressed for a more discriminating program of action against the communists, he was the only one of Diem's hosts to do so. When Diem met President Eisenhower, he pleaded for a bigger army and heavier equipment. None of the U.S. participants at this meeting mentioned the insurgency. Nor was anything said about his indifference to democratic practice; he had, after all, won the war. Veteran CIA man John Caswell, then working on Vietnam at headquarters, later thought that the rarity of communist-inspired incidents of violence had nourished this illusion of victory already in hand.²⁹

Later in 1957, the communist leadership reacted to the success of Diem's repressive tactics with the so-called extermination of traitors campaign, directed at GVN officials either popular with their constituents or notorious for their effectiveness against the communist underground. Limited in scale and highly selective, it aimed at blunting the edge of GVN repression and intimidating popular officials even while adhering to the strategy of political struggle.³⁰

Douglas Blaufarb, replacing Harwood as Nhu's principal contact, warned Nhu of the danger that these assassinations posed to the GVN's rural presence, but Nhu did not respond. Blaufarb also tried to alert the Country Team with a memorandum urging an improved police organization to deal with the threat of an intensified insurgency. This provoked little more reaction than had his warning to Nhu. Leland Barrows, heading the economic aid mission, argued that Americans should properly be helping the Vietnamese to govern themselves; when this was achieved, the assassinations would stop.³¹

Washington's enthusiasm for Diem and Nhu—the latter had enjoyed a successful visit only a month before Diem's—was not shared by the brothers' current CIA contacts in Saigon. New COS Nick Natsios decided not to try to replace Lansdale as a Diem adviser and volunteered to step aside in favor of

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Ambassador Elbridge Durbrow, also a new arrival, on matters that CIA might earlier have handled. At the same time, DCOS Blaufarb found Nhu much less congenial than Harwood had, certainly on the substantive level and apparently also on the personal. It is not clear whether the liberal impulses detected by Harwood were already giving way to the arbitrary authoritarianism of later years, or whether it was just different personal chemistry. In any case, Blaufarb disliked what he considered Nhu's "nasty" political philosophy and compulsive deviousness. To Blaufarb, both Diem and Nhu, despite their professed attachment to democratization, had as their sole practical goal to impose their personal control over the entire population.³²

In his contacts with both Diem and Nhu, Natsios advocated greater efforts to build popular support for the government, including some fence-mending with such old-line nationalist parties as the Dai Viets and the Vietnam Quoc Dan Dang (VNQDD). Neither brother responded, and Natsios thought Nhu positively "cynical" about the peasantry, regarding it as entitled to nothing but instruction in its duty to the government. All of this generated some pessimism about Diem's long-term prospects, not only in the station but also in the embassy. By December 1957, the ambassador concluded that President Diem had largely wasted the opportunity offered during the past year to begin urgently needed development programs. Continued inaction, in Durbrow's view, "might lead to a deteriorating situation in Viet Nam within a few years."³³

At the beginning of 1958, however, Diem's forces still enjoyed the military initiative. A flurry of attacks by Viet Cong guerrillas beginning in the summer of 1957 seems to have been driven, like the "extermination of traitors" campaign, simply by the GVN's threat to communist survival. Some Viet Cong, lacking even rice, were digging up roots for food, and weapons were also in desperately short supply. The attacking VC often disguised their units as sect forces or elements of the Binh Xuyen, leaving Saigon in some doubt about their identity. A case in point was an attack at a Michelin plantation in Tay Ninh Province in 1958. The official Hanoi military history of the war says that communist forces alone conducted it, whereas the U.S. embassy, at the time, thought it the work of a combination of Binh Xuyen, VC, and "other dissidents."³⁴

As the level of violence gradually rose in 1958, the American role in rural pacification in South Vietnam remained limited to supporting the ministerial apparatus of the Diem government. Diem had earlier directed the opening of the Central Highlands to ethnic Vietnamese—mostly refugee—settlement, and this effort on behalf of 2 percent of the population now absorbed half the agricultural aid dollar. The unfavorable cost-benefit ratio of this program worsened as the influx of ethnic Vietnamese further alienated the indigenous mountain

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peoples. And a timid program of land reform in the lowlands served mainly to antagonize the rice farmers affected by it, for many of them now had to pay rent to till paddy fields earlier awarded them gratis by the Viet Minh.³⁵

“Controlled Liberty”

Against this background, the station still hoped that Nhu’s National Revolutionary Movement might be used as a catalyst for political and social development programs aimed at attracting popular participation and loyalty. With this in mind, it continued paying for NRM training programs. But neither money nor advice mitigated the GVN’s preoccupation with internal security. Nguyen Thieu, the station’s working-level NRM contact, told his case officer in February 1958 that Diem’s first objective for the movement was the “elimination of subversive communist elements in every village, however remote.” Second, Diem wanted it to win a large majority in the impending National Assembly elections in order to “fortify GVN prestige with the masses and balk any last-ditch Viet Cong efforts to subvert Free Vietnam’s constitutional regime before it is firmly consolidated.”³⁶

Thieu told the station that another year’s subsidy of several million piasters would suffice to put the NRM on its feet and “wipe out all possibility of a relapse of Free Vietnam away from democratic forms.” The case officer acknowledged a recent expression of headquarters’ concerns about the organization, but concluded that it remained “the only significant fully-overt [*sic*] political grouping . . . in Free Vietnam, for better or worse.”³⁷

At this point, in early 1958, the Anticommunist Denunciation League had decayed into what Nhu described to DCOS Blaufarb as a “gathering place for opium-smokers and prostitutes.” The line ministries may have maintained a higher moral tone, but for Nhu and the station the regular bureaucracy still represented something to be circumvented. In these circumstances, Nhu launched, without CIA or other U.S. help, two extragovernmental organizations aimed at strengthening Saigon’s grip on its rural constituency. One of these was the Republican Youth. The other—led by Madame Nhu—was called the Women’s Solidarity Movement. With these two instruments, Nhu intended to bring, as the *Pentagon Papers* historian quoted him, “controlled liberty” to the countryside with programs of “paramilitary training [and] political and intelligence activities.”³⁸

Talking to Blaufarb in mid-1958, Nhu tacitly acknowledged the contradiction in the notion of “controlled liberty” when he described a recent meeting with GVN officials from the Mekong Delta. He had tried to explain to these

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officials that the answer to the covert VC organization was a covert GVN intelligence service. In this context, Blaufarb reported, “Nhu made the somewhat startling point that the local officials had been on the wrong track in basing their program of action . . . on the assumption that it was necessary first to have the support of the people. . . . Nhu told them that they could never get [this support] because they had to tax and discipline the population which in turn would not respond to them with affection.” What they needed, Nhu had explained, was a “covert organization” as extensive and efficient as that of the VC. Nhu told Blaufarb that his message had “created a great deal of surprise and interest on the part of his audience, who had apparently never given such matters much thought.”³⁹

Nhu seems to have had in mind an unofficial supplement to the twin programs of denunciation and police repression, but it is doubtful that in 1958 such an entity would have found a significant communist target. After the 1955 regroupment, according to Hanoi’s official military history of the war, “many provinces in South Vietnam still had several thousand cadre and Party members, and every village had a Party chapter.” In 1958 and 1959, however, after several years of GVN repression, “many villages had no Party chapter, and many Party chapters had only two or three members. In all of Nam Bo [roughly South Vietnam from the southern end of the Annamite chain to the tip of the Camau peninsula], the total number of Party members left was 5,000.” Had Hanoi been prepared to judge the eventual outcome by the fortunes of its southern apparatus in the late 1950s, it would have agreed with the American judgment of 1957 that Diem had broken the Viet Cong.⁴⁰

The Ngo brothers were perhaps less confident than many U.S. officials, in the spring of 1959, that they had in fact defeated the communists. Indeed, after four years of repression, they began telling their American interlocutors that they recognized the need for a positive approach. In April, Nhu told Natsios and new deputy chief of station William Colby of the GVN’s need to develop new political, economic, and social organizations to attract popular loyalty. Nhu said he thought the average Vietnamese incapable of a direct relationship with the state, which therefore had to set up “intermediaries to which he can attach his loyalties and which can represent his interests.” Diem expressed the same sentiments two months later in a talk with Ambassador Durbrow.⁴¹

Reciprocal Escalation

These assertions of progressive convictions may have had no purpose beyond playing to American bias, for they were accompanied by Diem’s promulgation

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in May 1959 of Ordinance 10-59. This decree prescribed the death penalty, with no right of appeal, for almost any offense that the GVN might choose to regard as subversive. It apparently responded to a wave of insurgent violence inspired by a decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party in Hanoi. In January 1959, the Fifteenth Plenary Session had decided finally to “liberate South Vietnam from the oppressive yoke of the imperialists and feudalists.” VC-led “mass political forces” would remain as the principal instrument of revolution, but these would enjoy the support of “either large or small armed forces, depending on the situation.” The Central Committee recognized that “the uprising of the people of South Vietnam [might] turn into a protracted armed struggle,” but seems to have hoped for a decisive confrontation in the relatively near future.⁴²

According to Hanoi’s military history of the war, the Viet Cong had by early 1959 some 175 platoon-sized units scattered across South Vietnam, and hundreds of self-defense teams and units at the village and hamlet level. These formations were to constitute the basis for the expansion of “local armed forces in South Vietnam” in the years that followed. Hanoi now began that expansion by infiltrating into the South some of the cadres regrouped to the North in 1954–1955. In May, the month in which Diem issued Ordinance 10-59, the North Vietnamese Army set up the 559th Transportation Group to transport men and equipment south along what became known as the Ho Chi Minh Trail. By the end of 1959, relying on porters to carry supplies, Hanoi had moved into South Vietnam a total of 542 men—mostly platoon- and company-level officers and technicians such as cryptographers, sappers, and armorers—and some 2,400 light weapons, quantities of explosives, and items like maps and binoculars.⁴³

At this point, communist military activity in the South already had greatly damaged the GVN’s position in the countryside. Assassinations of government officials had multiplied, and Diem’s army took heavy losses in ambushes and during attempted sweep operations. In April 1959, before infiltration from the North had even begun, CIA reported that the Viet Cong had already achieved virtual control over whole villages and districts in the Camau peninsula, a Viet Minh redoubt throughout the war against the French.⁴⁴

Diem’s draconian reduction of the Viet Cong organization between 1955 and 1959 was well understood by American observers. The perception, valid enough as far as it went, that in 1959 the communists were fighting for their very survival generated the “last gasp” interpretation of the new surge of Viet Cong violence. According to this theory, the communist resort to assassination and ambush demonstrated the insurgency’s failure to subvert the GVN,

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which now had only to employ its superior resources to wipe out the guerrillas. MAAG chief General Williams, repudiating the idea that GVN policy and practice might be contributing to the insurgency, asserted that the growth of Viet Cong influence depended entirely on coercion by a hard core of agents: “The truth is that the population of South Vietnam . . . is more responsive to fear and force than to an improved standard of living. The conclusion is clear: The paramount consideration is to gain and maintain a superiority of force in all parts of the country.”⁴⁵

Williams and others who saw the communists as limited by their reliance on duress ignored not only Diem’s secret police operations but also the coercive aspect even of GVN efforts to improve the peasant’s life. In 1959, responding to the intensified insurgency, Diem launched an effort to quarantine the rural population from the guerrillas by concentrating it in relatively compact communities called “agrovilles.” These may have represented one of the “intermediaries” of which Nhu had spoken, and in theory they had their attractions: running water, electricity, and medical care were to be standard features, and security from communist depredations would be relatively easily assured. But the program quickly foundered under the burdens of maladministration, forced relocation, and compulsory peasant labor.⁴⁶

In any case, coercion was not the only source of Viet Cong influence. The movement’s anticolonialist legacy, its land reform policy, its egalitarian style and offer of opportunities for the ambitious among the rural poor, together with the assiduous personal attention devoted to even low-level candidates for recruitment, stood in stark contrast to Diem’s reactionary mandarinism. Instead of consolidating the unquestioning loyalty to which Diem believed himself entitled, he had “dried the grass” of peasant resentment into incendiary opposition. There were, of course, many thousands of actively anticommunist villagers, and not all of these were Catholics. And many others, as it later became fashionable to say, simply wanted to be left alone. But neither the GVN nor the communists ever had any intention of allowing the opponent to monopolize rural support, and the peasant’s option simply to avoid any commitment gradually disappeared as the conflict spread.⁴⁷

The First Tet Offensive and Disagreement about Strategy

The Viet Cong raised the conflict to a new level when they assaulted an ARVN regimental headquarters at Trang Sup, in Tay Ninh Province, during the lunar New Year (Tet) holidays in late January 1960. In a devastating humiliation of Diem’s army, they killed or wounded sixty-six. After demolishing the head-

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quarters they made an uncontested withdrawal, carrying almost 500 individual and 32 automatic weapons, 2 mortars, and ammunition.⁴⁸

The Trang Sup attack represented only one—if certainly the most spectacular—incident in what might be called the first Tet offensive. In Long An Province, for example, the Viet Cong assassinated twenty-six officials—hamlet and village chiefs, security police, and others—and would have killed many more, had other local authorities not already taken refuge in the market towns of the province. Through this sudden resort to widespread terror, the communists reciprocated with a vengeance the GVN’s programs of denunciation and repression. GVN officials did not, for the most part, take up this challenge. They remained in the relative security of defended outposts, venturing out only with armed escorts to collect taxes, induct draftees, and issue birth and death certificates. The result was to give the Viet Cong freedom of movement in the countryside.⁴⁹

CIA reporting documented other ARVN defeats following the disaster at Trang Sup, but MAAG chief General Williams was reluctant to acknowledge the systemic weaknesses that these implied. He also continued to insist on limiting the Vietnamese Army’s internal security role. This produced a rare disagreement between him and President Diem, whose distaste for an ARVN role in counterinsurgency operations had disappeared in the wake of Trang Sup. In February, Diem directed the creation of fifty ARVN ranger companies to be deployed against the Viet Cong. In March, a reluctant General Williams agreed to MAAG support for a ranger force of up to 5,000 men.⁵⁰

Williams’s acquiescence did not end his opposition to a countersubversion charter for the Vietnamese Army. Most of the Vietnamese generals saw the military aspect of the conflict as one of territorial defense. In their view, ARVN would properly concentrate on saving or reclaiming land and population from communist control. General Williams and his staff abhorred what seemed to them a hopelessly static concept, and continued to insist on the primacy of mobile operations designed to fix and destroy the enemy.⁵¹

The MAAG’s indifference to Vietnamese strategic conceptions was doubtless reinforced by low regard for the quality of ARVN’s professional standards; one MAAG colonel went so far as to say that nearly every U.S. junior officer was better than the “average senior Vietnamese official, civilian or military.” And Diem’s politicization of his armed forces, with personal loyalty always more important than competence, meant that the Americans often had good reason to complain.⁵²

The Vietnamese, for their part, saw Williams as inflexibly committed to organizational and strategic concepts totally unsuited to the circumstances of

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the evolving war with the Viet Cong. George Allen, then a U.S. Army intelligence analyst and later deputy to CIA's special assistant for Vietnam affairs (SAVA), visited Vietnam in May 1960. He talked to numerous ARVN officers, including Major General Duong Van Minh ("Big Minh"), then chief of ARVN's Field Command and later the principal figure in the overthrow of President Diem. Minh said he had recently responded to a MAAG request for a pacification plan with a proposal to adapt the "oil-spot" strategy of gradually expanding territorial control that the French had employed in Morocco. But his American adviser, a MAAG colonel, had dismissed the idea out of hand, asserting that Minh simply did not understand the need for mobile operations that carried the war to the enemy.⁵³

MAAG officers may have been encouraged in this approach by their ignorance of the expanding insurgent population base. Allen learned from the ARVN J-2, Colonel Phuoc, that Vietnamese intelligence holdings showed a steady rise in VC strength levels. This unfavorable trend had not appeared in MAAG reporting, at least partly because the MAAG had, at that point, no intelligence shop. CIA efforts to fill this gap were constrained by the limited volume and reliability of the Vietnamese police reporting that provided most of what the agency knew about VC activity and about local communist military and political order of battle.⁵⁴

Like "Big Minh," Colonel Phuoc saw the problem as one of territorial defense. He wanted to station what he called a "commando company," to be deployed by the GVN district chief against guerrillas and local forces, in each of the 240-odd districts. This approach encountered the American preference for larger formations, and Phuoc got no support for it from the MAAG. Another of Allen's contacts, General Tran Van Minh ("Little Minh"), complained about the U.S. insistence on a battalion of 105 mm howitzers for every division. This guaranteed, he said, an army whose infantry never ventured more than 11,000 meters, the range of a 105, from the nearest road. When some of Diem's best units mutinied against him in November 1960, Allen thought their frustration over the sterility of government tactics to have been one of the main provocations.⁵⁵

"Big Minh's" chief of staff, Colonel Pham Van Dong, voiced a more fundamental critique during Allen's visit. In his view, the GVN's failure even to try winning the active loyalty of the rural population was leading toward defeat. The consensus among Allen's Vietnamese military contacts was that GVN and MAAG failures were combining to give the VC the upper hand. None of these contacts volunteered to take any responsibility for the recent string of ARVN defeats, but whatever their own failings, their pessimism seemed well founded,

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and Allen left Saigon convinced of a burgeoning insurgency and a deteriorating GVN position.

In Honolulu, Allen briefed General I. D. White, commander of U.S. Army Pacific, to this effect. White snorted that intelligence people never saw anything but the dark side. Furthermore, he had General Williams's assurances that ARVN was doing well. Allen ventured to remark that Williams had no intelligence officer and might be imperfectly informed, and White retorted that Williams was the army's senior man in Saigon and his judgment therefore authoritative.⁵⁶

Diem had reacted in character to the Trang Sup disaster when he ignored its implications for GVN legitimacy in the countryside and concentrated exclusively on a force buildup. By September 1960, his intransigence about reforms in the face of growing popular alienation persuaded Ambassador Durbrow that he might have to be replaced.⁵⁷

Bitterly opposed by General Williams, this pessimistic appraisal had its local CIA adherents. George Carver, later the DCI's special assistant for Vietnam affairs but then a young case officer in Saigon, identified three schools of thought in the station. At one extreme, where Carver placed himself, it was thought that the stubbornness and authoritarianism that had helped Diem survive the challenges of the early years had outlived their usefulness, and only new leadership could defeat the Viet Cong. For Carver, Diem had become a “boil to be lanced.” At the other extreme, William Colby, who replaced Nick Natsios in mid-1960, took the position that Diem understood his own problems and their solutions better than any self-appointed foreign adviser. The November 1960 mutiny did not appear to shake Colby's faith; indeed, Carver thought him increasingly “mesmerized” by President Diem. In the middle were well-connected case officers in liaison with senior police and military figures. Russ Miller, for example, was far from mesmerized by Diem, but tended to emphasize the absence of a promising candidate to replace him.⁵⁸

A moderate tone prevailed in this debate; the station was not at all polarized, as it came to be in 1963. Colby never discouraged the pessimists from reporting the views of Diem's Vietnamese critics and opponents, and even those who saw Diem's departure as inevitable had no sense of imminent disaster. Meanwhile, as the U.S. Mission in Saigon struggled to respond to the heightened level of communist-led violence, Hanoi was preparing the organizational basis for an even broader insurgency. On 20 December 1960, it created the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam, which—like its predecessor, the Viet Minh—provided an umbrella organization under whose

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under the aegis both communists and noncommunists could be mobilized for the struggle against the Diem regime. A month later, it declared the Liberation Army of South Vietnam to be an organ of the People's Army of Vietnam.⁵⁹

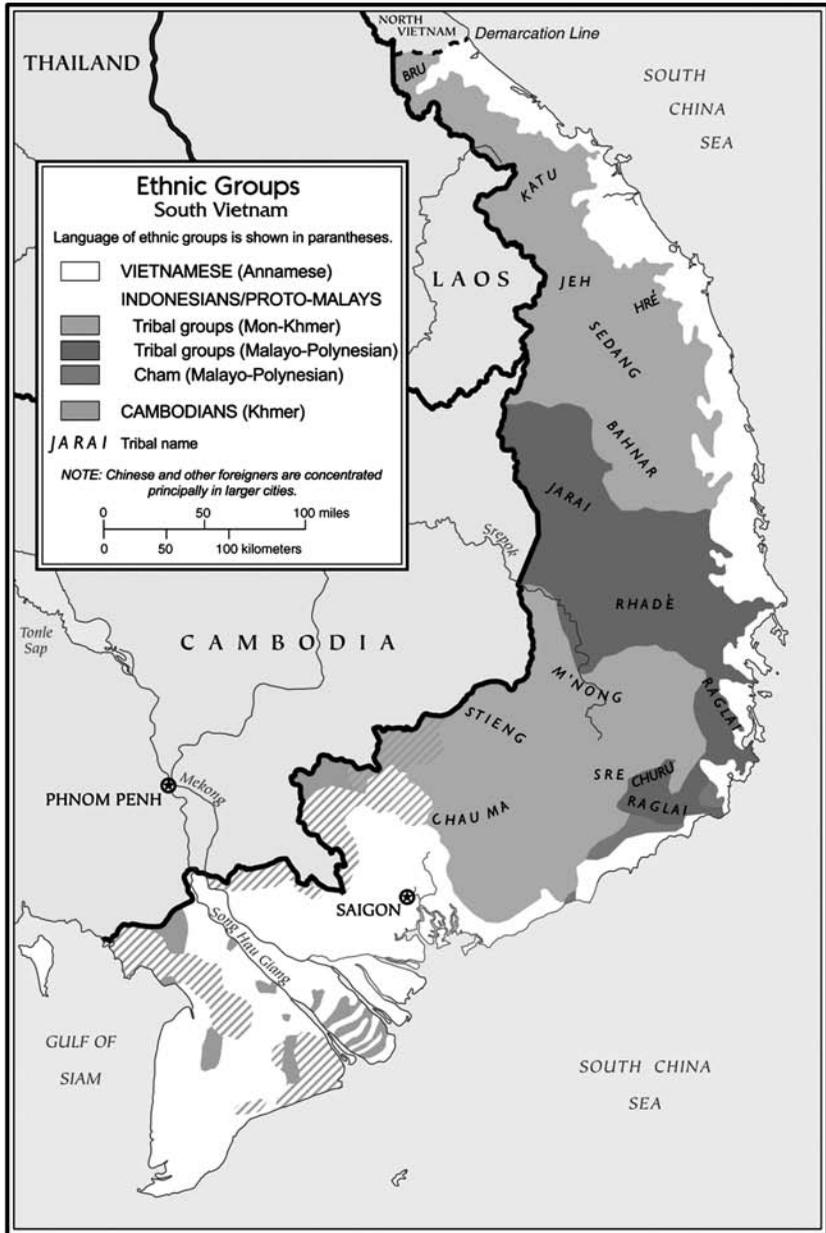
Counterinsurgency in the Central Highlands

By the end of 1960, not only the U.S. Mission but also, for the first time, President Diem, recognized that the VC posed an immediate threat to the GVN presence in the Vietnamese countryside. The growing sense of urgency was reinforced, on the American side, by the November election of John F. Kennedy, whose opponent, Richard Nixon, had accused him of being “soft on communism.” Looking for an arena in which to establish his anticommunist credentials, Kennedy selected the postcolonial nations as the new cold war battleground. Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev seemed to accept the challenge in a militant speech in January 1961 in which he pledged support for so-called wars of national liberation.¹

Kennedy came into office with the view that Laos, bordering on both North and South Vietnam—and on China, Burma, Thailand, and Cambodia as well—was the linchpin of U.S. resistance to communism in Southeast Asia. But the unfavorable prospects for the use of American ground forces there prompted him to compromise with the Soviets, reinstalling the neutralist Souvanna Phouma as prime minister and preparing to negotiate a cease-fire between government and communist forces. This compromise, followed by the failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba in April 1961, risked provoking new Republican charges of a failure of effective anticommunist resolve. At the same time, insurgent gains in South Vietnam had erased the optimism of the late 1950s, and the Diem regime suddenly looked vulnerable. In these circumstances, the administration chose Vietnam as the focus of its resistance to communist expansion in Asia.²



The population distribution in South Vietnam reflected the country's topography.



The non-Vietnamese tribal groups that predominated in the highlands represented a small fraction of the South Vietnamese population.

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Despite the damage to the agency's reputation inflicted by the Bay of Pigs disaster, President Kennedy assigned CIA a significant share of the expanded effort in Vietnam. In National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM) 52 of 11 May 1961, he authorized a "program for covert actions to be carried out by the Central Intelligence Agency which would precede and remain in force" after any commitment of U.S. forces to South Vietnam.³

As officials in Washington and Saigon worked to acquire and deploy new resources for the counterinsurgency effort in Vietnam, the GVN position continued to deteriorate. In October 1961, the president sent his personal military representative, General Maxwell Taylor, and White House adviser on Vietnam Walt W. Rostow to Saigon for a firsthand assessment. They returned with recommendations for a massive new commitment, including 8,000 troops. Kennedy backed away from deploying ground forces but approved additional material and advisory support. In this climate, DCI Allen Dulles authorized the first major CIA counterinsurgency program since the signing of NSAM 52. On 26 October, he endorsed a Saigon Station proposal to launch a village defense program in the lightly populated but strategically important Central Highlands.⁴

The CIA's counterinsurgency role grew after an interagency task force noted in January 1962 that support to irregular formations fell under the jurisdiction of neither the MAAG nor the civilian aid mission, called the U.S. Operations Mission (USOM). The task force recommended instead that CIA be charged with this responsibility. In May, Defense Secretary McNamara went further, promising Far East Division Chief Desmond FitzGerald a "blank check . . . in terms of men, money and materiel."⁵

During all the discussion about new strategies under the counterinsurgency rubric, the U.S. response to communist advances in South Vietnam continued to emphasize a military buildup. The influx of military hardware and advisers, and especially the introduction of the helicopter-borne infantry attack, regained the military if not the political initiative for the GVN until the Viet Cong adapted their tactics and humiliated a superior ARVN force at the Delta hamlet of Ap Bac in January 1963. During this period, from early 1961 until civil unrest paralyzed the Diem regime in mid-1963, CIA innovations led the American side of the dual effort to weaken the Viet Cong's rural organization and to mobilize the peasantry to defend itself. By late 1962, the programs had expanded beyond the agency's capacity to administer them, and over the course of 1963 the station ceded its management to the MACV. This exercise, called Operation Switchback, ended on 1 November 1963, the same day on which dissident generals, encouraged by the Kennedy administration, overthrew the government of Ngo Dinh Diem.⁶

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The Counterinsurgency Plan for 1961 and a New CIA Role

After Ed Lansdale's departure in December 1956, the CIA Station in Saigon played no active role in village-level counterinsurgency in South Vietnam until early 1961, when it launched the first of six new programs. Ambassador Durbrow drew the agency back into a counterinsurgency role when he instructed the local agency heads who made up his Country Team to carry out the first comprehensive planning exercise since the abortive Lansdale effort of 1955. In December 1960, they produced a 234-page counterinsurgency plan, which tried to address the civilian as well as the military aspects of the insurgency.⁷

Despite its bulk, the document must have seemed a feeble effort even to its authors. Superficial and incoherent, it produced recommendations amounting to no more than a compendium of the program preferences of each of the agencies represented on the Country Team. It offered no analysis of the causes of the insurgency, which it viewed as nothing more than the manifestation of a Hanoi-directed conspiracy. Although some officials, Ambassador Durbrow first among them, recognized Diem's self-destructive propensities, the plan's authors ignored the possibility that the GVN might be contributing to its own difficulties. "Military force," they said, "is clearly the major immediate threat to the stability of Viet-Nam today . . . terrorism can best be eliminated by the protective presence of conventional armed forces."⁸

The absence of any analysis or even acknowledgment of possible internal causes led to action proposals notable mainly for their detachment from reality. The station contribution made the commonsense observation that Saigon needed a centralized intelligence organization. It did not, however, acknowledge either Diem's well-known fear that a unified intelligence and security apparatus might be turned against him or the perennial foot dragging that this fear produced.⁹

In what looks like a pro forma bow to the Lansdale legacy, the station also suggested a civic action program. But this never went beyond empty generality; its objective, for example, was "to mobilize all available community resources in the support of a coordinated plan to advance the aims of the GVN and to enhance the well-being of the people." Compounding the confusion, the plan adopted the "communication" shibboleth. This notion assumed, without addressing the question of content, that increased communication between the GVN and the peasant could only strengthen the bonds between them.¹⁰

Despite its weaknesses, the counterinsurgency plan provided a bureaucratic framework for heightened U.S. involvement in Vietnam when Kennedy assumed the presidency in January 1961. But Ambassador Durbrow, implic-

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itly abandoning the position taken in the plan, argued that increased support should be contingent on political and military reforms in Saigon. Diem, as usual, saw no need for these, and the resulting standoff lasted for three months. The administration blinked first when it settled for Diem's pro forma assurances of reforms—to get even these, it had to replace Durbrow—and proceeded to boost the level of material and advisory support.¹¹

In Saigon the station, under Bill Colby, was already looking for new ways to help combat the insurgency. Colby credited Diem and Nhu with a better understanding of their problems than had either his predecessor Nick Natsios or Ambassador Durbrow, and he was eager to involve CIA in joint activity against the insurgency. Well before the approval of NSAM 52 in May, Colby had given station officers living or traveling in the provinces a general mandate to find opportunities for new programs.¹²

Although the station recognized that the main insurgent target was the ethnic Vietnamese population of the lowlands, it chose to concentrate its search among the non-Vietnamese mountain tribes. This decision reflected the strategic importance of the highlands for the infiltration and safe haven of VC forces. It also took into account the continuing absence of a GVN political program calculated to attract the loyalty of the lowland majority. Motivation was a less serious problem with the mountain tribes, whose antipathy for all Vietnamese could be exploited by offering them the means to resist the Viet Cong while direct U.S. participation offered some protection against GVN abuses.

CIA activity among the indigenous mountain people (known as *montagnards*, the French term borrowed by all Vietnamese and U.S. officials concerned with them) began with two nearly simultaneous initiatives in the spring of 1961. One dealt with the inhabitants of the Central Highlands, which lie on the western side of the Annamite chain, and the other with the mountain peoples living on the eastern slopes in the five coastal provinces below the 17th parallel. These tribal groupings, each with its own language and culture, had one thing in common: they were ethnically distinct from and suspicious of the lowland Vietnamese.¹³

The French colonial regime had sought to protect some of the tribes from Vietnamese exploitation by declaring the three largest provinces of the Central Highlands a Vietnamese-free zone. But the French had been unable, as their position weakened, to enforce this ukase with the Viet Minh, who by 1954 controlled all but the areas around the two main towns of the Central Highlands. Communist influence declined after the 1954 recall of Viet Minh cadres to North Vietnam, and from 1955 to 1960, the GVN exerted predominant influence. During this period, it antagonized the indigenous population by

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resettling in the highlands some 180,000 lowlanders, including refugees from North Vietnam and land-hungry peasants from coastal Central Vietnam.¹⁴

COS Colby's principal assets, as he directed the station back into counterinsurgency work, were the Military Operations Section (MOS), headed by Colonel Gilbert Layton, and the Political Operations Section (POS). As of early 1961, the MOS was working with Diem's Special Forces (VNSF) in covert intelligence operations against VC base areas in the adjacent portions of Cambodia and southern Laos. Meanwhile, the POS concentrated on civilian propaganda and political action work against the Viet Cong.¹⁵

Each of these two sections contributed one of the two early proposals for the exploitation of mountain tribes against the Viet Cong. Layton's project, which grew out of CIA frustration with the VNSF as a partner in intelligence collection, became known as the Citizens' Irregular Defense Groups (CIDG). The political section's proposal, called Mountain Scouts, evolved from an idea advanced by a GVN contact of the station officer residing in Hue.

The Citizens' Irregular Defense Groups

The cross-border intelligence activity sponsored by Gil Layton's section had always suffered from poor Vietnamese management; the Diem loyalist heading the VNSF, Colonel Le Quang Tung, lacked both military expertise and leadership ability. In November 1960, Layton had seized an opportunity to inject some energy and competence into the effort. At a MAAG staff meeting, someone announced the imminent arrival of U.S. Special Forces teams to bolster the embryonic counterinsurgency effort. No one seemed to know quite how to employ them, and Layton volunteered to have them train his VNSF teams.¹⁶

Even with this support, the VNSF achieved little access to the remote and inhospitable border with northern Cambodia and southern Laos. Layton therefore began to look for other candidates to set up intelligence nets directed at the Viet Cong military forces thought to be based in that area. In the early spring of 1961, a MOS case officer encountered a young volunteer from a nongovernmental organization (NGO) who was doing economic development work among the Rhadé, the principal tribe around the Darlac provincial capital of Ban Me Thuot. The volunteer spoke the Rhadé language; this proficiency and his evident commitment to their welfare encouraged the tribesmen to confide in him their attitudes toward both the GVN and the Viet Cong. Layton debriefed him in late April, and accepted his judgment that GVN neglect of the tribesmen risked delivering the strategically vital Central Highlands into the hands of the communists. A Rhadé village chief had recently said that the VC

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were hard at work proselyting among his people, and other sources also saw the communists as engaged in a concentrated effort to aggravate the tensions already characteristic of Rhadé dealings with the GVN.¹⁷

But intelligence, not political action, was still the top CIA objective, and Layton's first proposal reflected this priority. On 5 May 1961, he urged COS Colby to solicit Ngo Dinh Nhu's approval of a program designed to recruit as many as 1,000 tribesmen to "operate in the guerrilla-infested high plateau areas bordering on northern Cambodia and South Laos." It would cost almost nothing, he thought, to win at least the sympathetic attention of Rhadé leaders; less than \$1,000 would buy seeds for distribution around Ban Me Thuot and permit setting up an experimental crop station. Potential candidates for recruitment into intelligence nets were then in Ban Me Thuot for instruction in agricultural techniques, and Layton wanted to get to them before they dispersed.¹⁸

Colby expanded on this objective, in a tentative way, in a memorandum to Country Team colleagues on 25 May. He suggested that better treatment of the montagnards would facilitate military recruiting among them and allow their use for intelligence purposes. It might also, he said, facilitate organizing self-defense militia units among the highlanders. Colby acknowledged that American sponsorship of aid to the montagnards carried risks for U.S.-GVN relations: the palace might well interpret U.S. interest in the Rhadé as aimed at increasing tribal autonomy. There were other obstacles, including Vietnamese contempt for all montagnards and GVN determination to expand Vietnamese settlements in the Central Highlands, a policy "bearing strong resemblance to America's handling of its Indian population."¹⁹

The station proceeded with Layton's proposal for ad hoc agricultural aid, but the political sensitivity of the undertaking, even when limited to order-of-battle collection on the Viet Cong, delayed taking it further. On 28 June, Deputy Chief of Mission H. Francis Cunningham responded to a new Colby proposal with a full page of handwringing about GVN sensitivities. He noted that the most innocuous of foreign missionaries customarily waited a year for a visa, and concluded that "this is a difficult subject to broach to the Vietnamese. I wish you luck."²⁰

Undaunted, Colby approached Nhu. The COS specified that the object was territorial defense, not merely intelligence. He handled potential sensitivities about foreign dealings with the montagnards by stipulating the need for a GVN presence, and he proposed that the VNSF furnish this presence. He and Nhu visited a village defense program in Darlac, after which Nhu readily agreed to let the station work with the Rhadé.²¹

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Agreements with Colonel Tung and Darlac Province officials followed. But no Vietnamese were involved in the first negotiations with the montagnards themselves. For this, Layton turned in typically pragmatic style to two men, neither of whom worked for the agency and one of whom was not even a U.S. government official. These were the NGO man in Ban Me Thuot and a Special Forces medic, Sergeant First Class Paul Campbell. Originally assigned to Vietnam to train VNSF medics, Campbell was released by his Special Forces superiors to participate in a tour of Rhadé villages in Darlac in the early fall of 1961. Announcing themselves as “Dr. Paul” and “Mr. Dave,” they launched a survey that extended as much as seventy kilometers from Ban Me Thuot. Campbell would hold sick call in each village while the NGO man explored the political climate with the village elders.²²

Although courteously received, the pair encountered general distrust of their motives. The villagers openly compared them to the French and the Vietnamese, whose purposes they saw as entirely exploitive. But the villagers also appeared to hate the Viet Cong at least as much as they did the Diem government, and the two Americans persisted. It seemed prudent to start with an area not immediately threatened with communist attack or infiltration, and at the end of their survey tour they recommended Buon Enao, a Rhadé village only six kilometers from the provincial capital at Ban Me Thuot, as the site of a pilot project.²³

The Buon Enao Experiment

At Buon Enao, as elsewhere, the team had encountered a fundamental skepticism. Campbell noted that the elders “took all proposals as something sneaky, and . . . went into great conferences on all we said until they were satisfied.” In October, the Americans visited Buon Enao every day for three weeks. Their proposals were modest—a perimeter fence for security and a dispensary to care for the inhabitants of Buon Enao and surrounding villages. But these were major issues for the Buon Enao elders, and Campbell recorded the give-and-take of the team’s sessions with them: a fence would provoke tension with the army (the team’s response: we’ll get a letter of authorization from the province chief); it would provoke VC attack (we’ll arm you); we don’t know how to shoot (we’ll teach you); we have no bamboo for the fence (we’ll go into the jungle and cut it); the fence will displace crops and fruit trees (we’ll replace them). And there was the more basic consideration, which the Americans pointed out to the elders, that eventually they would have to choose sides, because “any bug between the foot and the rug is going to get squashed.”²⁴

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The Americans finally dealt with the last of the elders' objections, and at the end of October, the village chief committed himself to help build both the dispensary and the fence. Work began in early November, with 50 Buon Enao villagers and 125 more from adjacent villages employed at 35 piasters (then about 50¢) a day.²⁵

It soon became clear that implementation would be even more tortuous a process than the negotiations. The logistics of transporting and feeding the workers sent out to cut thatch and bamboo may have been the easiest part, for the requirements of Rhadé religious beliefs and superstitions continually threatened to interrupt one phase or another of the project. So arcane that a Rhadé with a Western education had to be hired to explain them, they included the belief that a monkey follows a man who does something foolish. Fence building seemed foolish, so a "monkey patrol" had to be sent through the surrounding jungle to clear it before construction could proceed. During the construction of new housing, a "crow patrol" kept watch to prevent any crows from perching on an unfinished dwelling, for if they did, it would have to be abandoned.²⁶

Twenty-six of the workers had come as refugees from several villages destroyed in a recent GVN bombardment. Most of the survivors had joined the Viet Cong, about which Layton observed without evident irony that "some of our Rhadé have been treated as bad or worse by the Viet Cong as by the government." These refugees, once they had committed themselves to the station's program, would serve as the nucleus of the village defense leadership. Layton cited an example of their motivation, telling headquarters about the sister of one of his workers, captured and taken into the jungle. There the VC eviscerated her, "filled the cavity with odds and ends and gave propaganda lectures to the assembled observers while the girl was engaged in dying."²⁷

Layton and his men quickly developed a proprietary attitude toward their Rhadé protégés, but they did not fail to recognize individual Vietnamese who provided indispensable cooperation. The enlightened province chief, a Major Bang; the provincial medical officer, Dr. Niem; and the provincial highway engineer all gave unstinting—and, one assumes, politically risky—support. Special Forces commander Colonel Tung saw the VNSF presence, established in October 1961, mainly in terms of heading off American support to Rhadé autonomy claims, but his Buon Enao team chief, Captain Khoai, fell in with the spirit of the project and as a well-connected native of the province played a useful role as troubleshooter.²⁸

Where help was not volunteered, the Rhadé and their American patrons commandeered it. As Campbell later described it, they stole sand from a Viet-

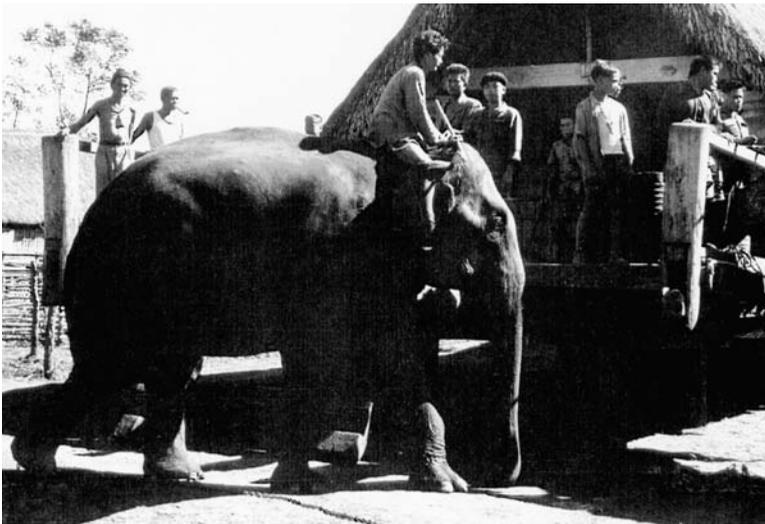


Two views (above and below) of Buon Enao, the first village organized for self-defense under the CIDG program, 1961.





Buon Enao watchtower, 1961.



Heavy lifting, Buon Enao, 1961.

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Buon Enao village defender,
1961.



namese landowner's riverbed and crushed rock from a highway construction project. The refugee resettlement authority was cutting bamboo for a project some sixty kilometers from Buon Enao, and Campbell explained that "the Vietnamese would cut the bamboo during the day and we'd go out at night and steal it." There was never any shortage of volunteers for these nocturnal forays, and Campbell believed that "stealing from the Vietnamese was one of the greatest points we made with the Rhadé. They felt then that we were really out to help them and [were] not just tools of the Diem regime. Of course," he added piously, "we never openly criticized the Diem Government or Vietnamese officials of any position."²⁹

The DCI's 26 October funding authorization permitted the acceleration of construction activity, and the Rhadé completed the perimeter fencing and their new dispensary in early December. At this point, the program still lacked a name. The station wanted something anodyne enough to avoid provoking more curiosity than necessary—the main thing was to avoid creating the appearance of a covert offensive military unit—and COS Colby finally settled on the title Citizens' Irregular Defense Groups. As expected, this device did not entirely dampen the curiosity of outsiders, especially on the American side, and Colonel Layton in Saigon and his people in Buon Enao had to field que-

Improved weapons concealment. Rifle (right) and rifle plus submachine gun (below), Buon Enao, 1961.



Dental care, without benefit of anesthetic, Buon Enao, 1961.



Sergeant Campbell, USSF medic, Buon Enao, 1961.

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ries from representatives of MAAG, USOM, and the press. “We always had a story for them,” Sergeant Campbell wrote, usually based on “half-truths,” but persuasive enough, he thought, to satisfy them. In fact, the only aspect of the program that required concealment was its agency sponsorship.³⁰

With initial construction completed, the schedule called for issuing weapons and training the Rhadé in their use. MAAG chief General Paul Harkins had approved the issue of weapons from Military Assistance program stocks, but there was nothing yet in the pipeline designated for CIDG. Layton therefore resorted to the kind of informal requisition on which his people prided themselves. A friendly MAAG logistics officer gave him to understand that ARVN was to pick up a consignment of carbines the next day; if Layton arrived first he could have some. So Layton’s truck appeared well before the 0730 hours deadline and picked up fifty weapons for issue to the first volunteers at Buon Eno. A U.S. Special Forces (USSF) “A” detachment of twelve men arrived on 12 December 1961 to launch the training program.³¹

The CIDG Area Development Center

Buon Eno now became the site of the first CIDG Area Development Center, which controlled social and economic development services as well as the village defense system in the surrounding area. Both the civilian services and the military preparations, in turn, served an offensive strategy aimed at preempting or reclaiming land and people from the Viet Cong, and eventually at asserting GVN control over all of the highlands inhabited by cooperating montagnards.³²

At the tactical level, the station insisted on a strictly defensive posture: not only the static village defense element but also the company-sized mobile unit called the Strike Force was devoted exclusively to village protection. The defensive principle encompassed even relatively aggressive activity like long-range patrolling, which aimed not at pursuit of the enemy’s regular forces but at securing advance warning of attempted communist infiltration or attack on village defenses. To Layton and his people, this focus on village defense constituted the heart of the CIDG concept, for they saw the motivation of their protégés as limited to preservation of their homes and way of life. “Give them something to fight for and something to fight with,” but do not try to create a professional army.³³

COS Colby later acknowledged the similarity of the CIDG concept to the “oil-spot” technique pioneered by French Marshal Lyautey in the campaign against Moroccan resistance to colonial encroachment early in the twenti-

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eth century. The unique features of CIDG arose from CIA's logistic flexibility and from a characteristic readiness to extemporize, dispensing with institutional doctrine and working outside established administrative structures, both American and indigenous.³⁴

The Americans at Buon Enao quickly discovered how far they had to go to turn the montagnards into a fighting force. The Rhadé feared the Viet Cong at least as much as they hated them; an early ambush party, for example, froze when a lone VC entered its field of fire. The accompanying Special Forces adviser—Layton thought he might have been a medic—shot the guerrilla, whereupon the Rhadé rushed up, riddling the body with bullets. The incident became the stuff of Rhadé legend, the first victory over the ferocious enemy.³⁵

It was important to ensure that CIDG ammunition did not wind up in VC hands, and Layton's unit, known outside the station as the Combined Studies Division (CSD), demanded that after every engagement the troops gather up cartridge casings to be exchanged for replenishment. No one expected recovery of every casing, and resupply was not calculated on a strict one-for-one basis—there was even a small allowance for hunting—but the Rhadé got the point.³⁶

The system of weapons control was less satisfactory, and Layton later judged his practice of issuing weapons directly to village defenders rather than to the village elders a serious mistake. In retrospect, he could see that recovery of ordnance in villages declared secure would have been easier had the elders been given custody of a central village armory.³⁷

But this oversight caused no problems in the early days of the program, when the main object was to expand and consolidate territorial control before the Viet Cong could mount a concerted challenge. By July 1962, the Strike Force at Buon Enao had about 650 armed and trained men deployed in support of 3,600 unpaid village defenders, and the MOS was recruiting among tribes such as the Sedang, Jarai, and Bahnar in highland provinces including Kontum and Pleiku. The station now believed that in the “accidental outgrowth” of an activity originally conceived only as a source of intelligence on the Viet Cong it had found the answer to what it called the French dilemma. It noted that the nationwide total of 50,000 militia in the GVN's Self-Defense Corps was far too small to protect any entity below the level of the village headquarters without being enfeebled by dispersion. CIDG, with its hamlet defenders and Strike Forces, protected against small-scale enemy intrusion into even the smallest agglomeration of villages. Anticipating eventual larger attacks, the program incorporated a system reporting larger concentrations for response by ARVN.³⁸

The prospect of material benefits constituted a major aspect of the CIDG

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appeal to the Rhadé, and the station's Combined Studies Division and its Special Forces teams became deeply involved in medical and economic development projects. With a dispensary already in place, a training program for village health workers got under way in early 1962. By July, eighty-eight villages in the Buon Eno area had resident medics. That month, the program treated almost 5,000 patients. Their confidence growing, the tribesmen now began bringing their sick to the dispensary even before their traditional medical men and faith healers had given up hope of effecting a cure.³⁹

Threatened by CIDG expansion, the Viet Cong wanted to discredit the increasingly popular medical program. Their propaganda claimed, for example, that DDT was a "slow-acting poison which would eventually kill" all the tribesmen. Reinforcing propaganda with intimidation, the VC laid ambushes for health workers visiting outlying villages. In two cases, they executed villagers, one a small boy and the other an old man, for warning a health worker of an impending ambush.⁴⁰

Western medical practice meant Western standards of sanitation, and Paul Campbell introduced such innovations as the latrine, with a 1-piaster fine for incidents of failure to use it (the proceeds went to buy toilet paper), and a weekly village cleanup. Special Forces personnel normally served only a six months' tour in Vietnam, but Campbell returned in the spring of 1962 to exploit the resources of the USOM Public Health Division and the GVN's national and provincial health services. This led to relatively large-scale undertakings, such as malaria control, and substantially broadened the impact of American-sponsored services to the montagnards. USOM and the GVN, for their part, profited by expanded access when previously inaccessible villages came under CIDG protection.⁴¹

The station wanted to get its Rhadé medics paid under the provisions of the U.S.-supported GVN Village Health Worker program, and with GVN consent arranged for USOM to advance the funds to the Ministry of Health. The GVN then reneged, probably at the instance of Ngo Dinh Nhu, who maintained in typically detached fashion that "this would be a good practical lesson in democracy and that democracy was not a one-way street." The chief of station wrote him to protest, but to no avail.⁴²

The combination of an occasional medical emergency and the can-do spirit of the Special Forces medics produced a small scandal when the American Medical Association (AMA) learned of charges that medics were performing major surgery in CIDG dispensaries. The station thought the atmosphere inflamed by USOM envy and press sensationalism, but in the end the AMA persuaded the U.S. Surgeon General's office to send a physician to investigate.

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According to a station medic—who had had the time to ensure that all was in order—the inspector found the facilities and practices not merely acceptable but positively admirable.⁴³

Gil Layton recalled that there had been amputations required for the survival of Rhadé combatants wounded in action, and Paul Campbell acknowledged that a few medics had exceeded their charter. But Campbell defended his colleagues and their adherence to the Hippocratic injunction first to do no harm. He rejected criticism from GVN officials, usually indifferent to tribal welfare, as simply hypocritical, and dismissed complaints from American health officers as evidence of jurisdictional envy. Campbell described what he saw as the real problem: “Trying to explain the difference between a U.S. Army aid man and a qualified doctor to a group of ‘Montagnards’ would be like discussing the workings of the New York Stock Exchange [with] a five-year-old child.” The medics therefore did what they considered they had to do.⁴⁴

Layton and his people in the Combined Studies Division saw a higher standard of living for the montagnards as an important incentive, and they set out to improve the local economy. Except for modest Strike Force pay and a small subsistence allowance during medical and other training courses, the CIDG program injected almost no cash into the montagnard economy. There was no prospect of a separate economic development budget, and Combined Studies therefore had to find material resources, exploitable by Rhadé labor, that could be obtained at no cost to the agency.⁴⁵

The answer lay in ARVN salvage dumps. CSD officers found, for example, old uniforms which, when cut off and hemmed above elbow and knee, made better clothing than most of the Rhadé had ever had. The work of salvaging called for seamstresses and sewing machines, and a small cottage industry sprang up, with Rhadé women learning to operate the sewing machines found somewhere by Layton’s men. Trying to generate economic activity that would survive the eventual departure of the Americans and of amenities like electricity, CSD managed to find treadle machines for the novice seamstresses.⁴⁶

Other such projects included the blacksmith industry, which used leaf springs from junked vehicles in ARVN dumps to fashion machetes and other implements. The emphasis on self-sustaining activity extended to projects like water supply; the water distribution system in one village used bamboo for pipe and water buffalo skin for valves.⁴⁷

One of Layton’s cardinal rules demanded respect for tribal customs and the local system of criminal justice until and unless the tribesmen were ready to change. This principle sometimes conflicted with practical considerations like exploiting favorable terrain for airstrip construction. One otherwise excellent

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site had a large tree that would have to be cut, but discussion with the local elders revealed that it was haunted: a dying old man had told his family that it would be his postmortem abode. The construction engineer, from one of CSD's Navy Seabee teams, wanted to ignore such primitive nonsense, and the case officer on the scene had to get Layton to instruct him to find another site.⁴⁸

Observing the CSD rule, the U.S. Special Forces team at Buon Enao pretended not to notice when Rhadé tribesmen dragged one of their own down the village street on their way to beat him to death with a shovel. The condemned man had VC connections, but the operative offense was the murder of another man's wife; he had beaten her to death with a shovel.⁴⁹

The Rhadé could not always be accommodated. A princess of this matriarchal tribe chose a U.S. Special Forces sergeant for her husband. He started getting small gifts, whose significance he missed until the would-be bride and her party arrived to claim him. CSD arranged for his transfer, and a case officer apologized to her for the sergeant's failure to acknowledge that he was already owned by a woman in his own country.⁵⁰

By June 1962, there were some twenty base camps scattered around the country. Participating tribal groups included the Sedang, Jarai, Bahnar, and Koho in the Central Highlands, plus the Cham and several other groups on the eastern slopes of the Annamite chain. By November, not quite a year after the first Rhadé were trained at Buon Enao, CIDG and its twenty-four U.S. Special Forces "A" detachments had armed some 23,000 men in twelve provinces. Requirements for logistic support grew in proportion, outstripping the capacity even of CIA's flexible system. With MACV approval, Layton's men roamed the salvage yards, retrieving World War II-era ARVN jeeps recently replaced under the Military Assistance program, along with tons of spare parts. The station set up a shop in Saigon and hired mechanics to rebuild them.⁵¹

The rapid growth of the program produced a critical shortage of ordnance. Combined Studies somehow (two years later, Gil Layton could not recall exactly how) persuaded ARVN to give up \$1.5 million worth of ordnance. This materiel, including 15,000 light and 100 heavy weapons and several million rounds of ammunition, met immediate needs while new supplies dedicated to the program went into the U.S. pipeline.⁵²

Gil Layton's aptitude for exploitation of other people's resources extended to the critical requirement for air support. As CIDG began to grow, the U.S. Air Force in Vietnam set up a program called Farmgate, intended to supply tactical support to ground combat operations. The Farmgate commander went looking for mission assignments, and Layton was happy to oblige. The pilots, flying piston-engine trainers and substituting cowboy boots for regulation combat

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boots, adopted the CIDG as a program after their own heart. The result was that, for several months in 1962, Farmgate became the CIDG air force, supporting montagnard villages under attack and hitting VC targets reported by CIDG intelligence. The U.S. Air Force then centralized the management of its resources in Vietnam, and CIDG lost its privileged position.⁵³

The Payoff

As we have seen, Layton and his officers in the provinces had deliberately chosen to begin the CIDG program in an area not immediately threatened by the Viet Cong, and their faith in Rhadé motivation was not immediately tested. When VC attacks began, in 1962, they were gratified to see villages not only defending themselves but also sending their militia to help neighboring villages under attack.⁵⁴

In one such incident, the Viet Cong tested the defenders of a village called Buon Trap, who had returned from training at Buon Enao only two weeks earlier. Attacked in the early morning of 24 July 1962, the eighty-six militiamen, gradually reinforced by defenders from three neighboring villages, fought until their ammunition ran low. Then, with a rear guard providing covering fire, they withdrew from the village. Next day, they returned with a section of the Buon Enao Strike Force and retook the village. The VC responded with two days of harassing attacks on Buon Trap, then hit the village with a force estimated at one to two companies. By this time, the Buon Trap and Strike Force defenders had been reinforced by a company of Vietnamese Marines, and the VC abandoned the effort after a ten-minute firefight. Overall, during the course of 1962, Buon Enao forces killed more than 200 VC and captured more than 460. And despite their essentially defensive stance, they mounted sixteen significant Strike Force offensive actions.⁵⁵

Performance of this kind demonstrated the tribesmen's will to resist, and the station estimated in late 1962 that the CIDG program had drawn under its protection one-third of the estimated 100,000 Rhadé tribesmen. Casualties had not damaged CIDG morale, losses of arms and equipment were negligible, and defections to the Viet Cong were unheard of. It was clear that GVN officials still doubted Rhadé loyalty, but the station believed that montagnard performance against the common enemy was gradually dissipating GVN suspicion.⁵⁶

Nevertheless, the combination of American protectiveness and GVN suspicion limited CIDG success in creating reciprocal bonds of loyalty between the montagnards and the government. Gil Layton, more attuned to GVN

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weaknesses than to his own officers' comportment as self-appointed champions of the downtrodden, saw the government as simply obstructionist. In August 1962, with CIDG installations serving minority communities scattered from the demilitarized zone to the Camau peninsula, he wrote that "each new offshoot was plagued by the ineptness, inefficiency, jealousy, corruptness, or subversiveness of civilian bureaucrats and military commanders. . . . When the average Vietnamese civilian or military official moves into an area that has been restored to the sovereignty of Vietnam he ordinarily manages to antagonize the population and restore Viet Cong prestige. In short, the Viet Cong as an opponent is a secondary problem. The Vietnamese official is the real obstacle to success."⁵⁷

Layton probably had in mind the testimony of witnesses like Major Donn Fendler, a Special Forces officer advising the Vietnamese Special Forces, who had visited camps that lacked a permanent American presence. In Fendler's opinion, the Vietnamese system not only prohibited initiative from below but prevented even routine activity if there were not explicit orders. "Pride of position is such that even a well trained and well supplied VNSF medic, as a mere NCO [noncommissioned officer], cannot offer his [commanding officer] any advice, and waits to treat the sick until ordered to do so." VNSF Headquarters, plagued by jealousy and petty quarrels, gave its teams in the field no support or guidance, and where no American presence made up for this, they were "totally ineffective." Fendler thought this most unfortunate, for in his view "officers and many NCOs . . . are well trained and, if given the proper leadership, [and] allowed a great deal more initiative . . . could exert a great deal of damage against the VC."⁵⁸

But Fendler acknowledged the problem created by Rhadé hostility to the Vietnamese: "Unless an American is present when the Vietnamese camp commander is issuing any type order to the montagnard commander, the [latter] will not obey." Fendler identified the GVN's dilemma, namely, the prospect that if it defeated the VC it would then face another armed and trained potential adversary in the form of CIDG's hamlet defenders and Strike Forces.⁵⁹

The Problem of Control

If the GVN's problem was the arming of a potential adversary, the station's main difficulty was the conflict between its desire for GVN participation and the need to ensure program integrity by controlling the distribution of resources. For one thing, ARVN division commanders and province chiefs complained about CIA usurpation of GVN authority even as they failed to

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assign to CIDG the Vietnamese officers requested by Combined Studies. More fundamentally, although perhaps with the exaggeration born of exasperation, Gil Layton described GVN officials' role in the program as one of "obstructionism, jealousy, suspicion and continual concerted drive to get their hands in the till." When in 1963 more of the funds and materiel for CIDG began passing through GVN channels, the revised procedure "did not gain cooperation, but merely made [these resources] available to elements which were acting contrary to the best interests of all concerned."⁶⁰

This tension was seldom directly acknowledged in new COS John Richardson's meetings with Ngo Dinh Nhu. In June 1962, when Nhu said he wanted to expand the program, the COS responded by suggesting sixteen more U.S. Special Forces teams for the highlands. Nhu hedged on this, as he did a month later when Richardson proposed arming another 12,000 men in the next year and expanding the program into the Mekong Delta. Revealing his concern about control, Nhu wanted CIDG camps placed under his ARVN division commanders, and three of his Republican Youth members stationed in each CIDG village.⁶¹

In August, the conflict between the GVN's sovereign rights in its dealings with the montagnards and the station's desire to preserve the tribesmen's cooperation led to an open break between Combined Studies and Colonel Tung's Special Forces. Tung withdrew his men from Buon Enao, and the station worried that he might provoke incidents against the Americans at other camps. Richardson called the NGO man down from Buon Enao and took him to see Ngo Dinh Nhu, who professed ignorance of the problem. Nhu talked out of both sides of his mouth. He insisted that Diem remained enthusiastic about CIDG, but then, when Richardson said he would welcome hearing that from Diem himself, said he could not speak for the president. The COS was left with the impression that in fact Diem harbored some reservations. But Nhu apparently worked out a *modus vivendi* with Colonel Tung, inasmuch as VNSF remained, however reluctantly, the main GVN presence in the program.⁶²

Nhu signaled his sense of the foreignness of the whole enterprise when Richardson proposed, during the same August meeting, that Nhu visit Buon Enao with Ambassador Frederick Nolting. In response to a question about protocol, Nhu said he thought Nolting should issue the invitation, rather than the other way around; he seemed to be treating U.S. sponsorship of CIDG as earning some kind of extraterritorial rights in the highlands.⁶³

Well aware of mutual antipathy between the Vietnamese and the montagnards, the station persisted in its quixotic campaign to generate some reciprocal empathy. In one such effort, it arranged for thirty-two tribal leaders to see

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the CIDG installations serving other ethnic groups, and to visit Saigon. The project was not free of glitches: six of the group boarded the wrong plane in Pleiku, and once in Saigon were detained for two days before VNSF in Saigon found them in police detention. But the reunited group saw textile factories, schools, and the National Assembly, and the station even managed to arrange an audience for it with President Diem.⁶⁴

At this meeting, Diem waxed eloquent, giving his visitors forty-five minutes instead of the scheduled fifteen. The only member of the audience whose comportment did not meet protocol standards was one of the three who understood no Vietnamese; he slouched against a wall until the escorting VNSF captain straightened him up. The tour literally as well as figuratively broadened its participants' horizons: they had seen the ocean at Da Nang, and one of them wondered aloud why the gods had wasted in the ocean the salt always in short supply in the mountains. Persuaded that the tour deserved to be expanded into a regular program, the station proposed its continuation to the GVN, presumably to Colonel Tung, but got no reply.⁶⁵

No program of guided tours would have erased the mutual mistrust between the GVN and the tribes, but Diem and Nhu did allow the program's continued growth. By early 1963, CIDG had some 38,500 men under arms, almost 11,000 of these in full-time Strike Force units. CIDG was still growing when the time came at the end of 1962 to transfer the administration of American support from CIA to the U.S. Special Forces.⁶⁶

The Mountain Scout Program

CIDG was the first of the two CIA-supported counterinsurgency programs aimed at the montagnard population and at the Viet Cong presence in the highlands. But whereas the CIDG initiative came exclusively from CIA, the second program, the Mountain Scouts, originated with the Vietnamese. In April 1961, as Layton was beginning to explore the potential of the Rhadé tribesmen, the station officer serving in Hue, James Mullen, endorsed an idea presented to him by Captain Ngo Van Hung of the Social Affairs Directorate, the GVN's office for the montagnards. Ngo Dinh Can, the Diem brother who ruled Central Vietnam, had been using Hung to conduct liaison with the tribal minorities. Hung was appalled by what he found in the course of his dealings with the tribes, and his report to Can contained an extraordinary indictment of Vietnamese treatment of the montagnards.⁶⁷

Hung accused GVN officials of behaving like "true mandarins" when not intimidated by the Viet Cong into total passivity, and charged ARVN with "ill-

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considered reprisals,” including the summary execution of suspects and the torching of villages. GVN reporting on the montagnards was mendacious, and where there was contact with the tribesmen, inexperienced and incompetent officials nullified all efforts at mutual comprehension and conciliation. Vietnamese merchants, for their part, exploited the montagnards by buying from them at derisory prices.⁶⁸

Hung’s paternalistic solution emphasized military and police reforms and the creation of model villages, with their solidly indoctrinated inhabitants organized along apparently Maoist lines. It would be necessary to identify and “buy off the malcontents,” while determining the reasons for discontent and working to satisfy legitimate aspirations. A new commercial network would give the tribesmen a fair return on their handicrafts and incidentally serve to acquire and transmit information on the communists. The GVN should “eliminate dangerous and recalcitrant elements,” while forming self-defense units among those judged reliable. The montagnards should participate in civic affairs, security programs, and economic development, all under the guidance of so-called *agents-pilotes*—Vietnamese functionaries detailed from their respective ministries. Hung’s scheme represented a calculated mixture of carrot and stick: “loyalty must be warmly rewarded, betrayal punished in exemplary fashion.” Good results would follow, Hung thought, if the GVN chose its representatives carefully, promoted loyal tribesmen and isolated the dissidents, and guaranteed physical security.⁶⁹

COS Colby thought Hung’s plan looked “excellent.” So, it seems, did the various station section chiefs who reviewed it over the next four months; their only suggested modifications dealt with bureaucratic mechanics. One of these urged that the station proceed without reference to the Country Team, while another called for emphasis on quiet cooperation with province chiefs. No one commented on Hung’s list of GVN mis- and malfeasances, nor did anyone ask whether enough qualified Vietnamese officials with honest intentions toward the montagnards could be found to implement his authoritarian recommendations. Just one station officer expressed reservations, saying that the “estimate for winning back [the] highlands seems highly optimistic.”⁷⁰

Hung’s proposed agenda called for a variety of anti-VC measures and aid programs for the tribes. He wanted a bounty program for Viet Cong, implemented by “village assassination teams”; material aid to relocated tribesmen; a convention of tribal leaders and a new school for their sons; psychological warfare teams; and GVN “recognition” of the montagnards. The paramilitary aspects of this program brought MAAG into the picture, and when the station decided to explore Hung’s ideas further, it first solicited Country

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Team sponsorship. Ambassador Durbrow approved, and Lieutenant General Lionel McGarr, chief of the MAAG, agreed to have one of his people participate. As the station's action officer, Colby chose Ralph Johnson, a flamboyant World War II B-24 bomber pilot who had adopted covert action as his agency specialty.⁷¹

Johnson flew to Hue in early October 1961. His report of the meeting with Captain Hung deals only with the irregular warfare aspects of Hung's program; it is not known why the civilian aspects, so prominent in the paper given Jim Mullen, now disappeared. Hung proposed deploying special teams to poison VC rice depots, booby-trap VC munitions depots, kill or capture VC cadre in ambushes or in raids on communist-controlled villages, and gather intelligence. Johnson endorsed this program, saying he expected it to tie down Viet Cong military forces and reduce communist pressure on montagnard villages.⁷²

Johnson offered to consider support for some twenty "mobile teams," a number presumably driven by his understanding that twenty-one highland districts "were considered ripe for complete VC control." On Gil Layton's advice, he proposed a fifteen-man team, armed with automatic weapons, in order to achieve the desired balance between firepower and mobility. Team leaders, apparently assimilated montagnards, were to come from the Civil Guard. Johnson had earlier described the Civil Guard and the Self-Defense Corps as "corrupt and ineffective ciphers," and he must have been counting on Captain Hung's leadership and his own logistic support to inspire effective performance in the new and more challenging program.⁷³

It remained to get the approval of the various American and Vietnamese bureaucracies. Johnson and the MAAG representative, Major Melvin Price, made a tour of the affected provinces—Kontum and Pleiku in the Central Highlands and Quang Nam, Quang Ngai, and Binh Dinh, all east of the Annamite chain. They briefed province chiefs and MAAG advisers and returned to Saigon to report favorable reactions. In Kontum especially, MAAG officers saw the danger of imminent GVN collapse. They estimated that the 6,700 ARVN troops there faced 5,000 armed Viet Cong. Johnson invoked the commonly accepted imperative of a twelve-to-one ratio of government forces to those of the insurgency, drawn from the struggle then winding down in Malaya, to point up what he considered the fragility of the GVN's position.⁷⁴

General McGarr granted the MAAG imprimatur to the Hung-Johnson program, which assured its approval by the Country Team. But the GVN was not yet on board. The bureaucratic obstacles the station had just overcome on the U.S. side were as nothing compared to the proliferation of quasi-feudal fiefdoms that constituted the Diem government. Captain Hung, represent-

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ing the GVN's Montagnard Affairs Directorate in Hue, had direct reporting responsibilities to the president, the minister of Interior, VNSF chief Colonel Tung's office in the presidency, and the de facto ruler of Central Vietnam, Ngo Dinh Can. To proceed from policy approval to implementation also required the cooperation of the affected ARVN corps commanders and province chiefs, each of whom regarded his domain in strictly proprietary terms. But the station had already lobbied the province chiefs, and Hung now won the approval of Ngo Dinh Can. This sufficed, at least at the protocol level, to discourage resistance from any of the other GVN players, and it remained only to get Washington to authorize the necessary resources. The DCI's funding authorization of 26 October took care of this, and the Mountain Scouts became a bilateral program of the CIA and the GVN.⁷⁵

Working Out the Mountain Scout Philosophy

Ralph Johnson, working with the Montagnard Affairs Directorate, enjoyed the same freedom to improvise as did his colleagues working with the Rhadé. As he prepared to begin arming and training the first Mountain Scouts, he modified his first proposal. Without returning to Captain Hung's original political and educational proposals, Johnson moved from exclusive emphasis on irregular warfare to a program that included competition with the communists for montagnard loyalty to the GVN. This may have reflected the advice of Gil Layton, whose planning for the CIDG program, centered on the theme of territorial defense, was further advanced. Whatever the influences on his thinking, Johnson now began to describe the goal in terms of separating the montagnards from the Viet Cong, "thus depriving the VC of local resources." In one case, this involved the distribution through the local ARVN commander of 1,200 bolt-action Springfield rifles to villagers in Kontum Province.⁷⁶

In December 1961, the first 350 Mountain Scout trainees arrived in Hue and occupied a nearby camp built and furnished over the previous two weeks with \$10,000 provided by the station. Hung had arranged for instructors from the First ARVN Division, all of them trained at Fort Benning or Fort Bragg, and from the GVN's Montagnard Affairs Directorate. Hung and Johnson thought it necessary to separate the program's intelligence collection function from the action element, and they began a separate training program in Hue for district-level intelligence agents whose operations would supplement those already being conducted by the GVN in their home areas. Personnel in both categories were to be selected by the GVN district chief and not, according to montagnard practice, by tribal elders. The authorities in Central Vietnam feared an

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independent montagnard force, and the station saw their anxiety explained by tribal resistance expressed in a Rhadé revolt as recently as 1957.⁷⁷

The disparity between the goals of the training programs and the time allotted for instruction suggests that Hung and Johnson overestimated the capacity of the students—many of them presumably semiliterate at best—and underestimated both the complexity of the subject matter and the demands and hazards of the proposed operational missions. Teams and intelligence collectors were each to be trained in one month. The schedule called for Mountain Scouts to get intensive political indoctrination (whose substance Johnson does not describe), partly to ensure their loyalty and partly to prepare them for their “psywar job” among their own people. Scouts were also to learn civic action techniques and to acquire skills in marksmanship, “ambush, surprise, deception, etc.,” that is, “the essentials of anti-guerrilla warfare.” The twenty-one intelligence agents were to learn how to spot and recruit informants, conduct “target analysis [and] operational testing,” and master clandestine drop sites, reporting techniques, and administrative procedures. Johnson, whose sunny optimism always resisted the notion that a desired goal might not be easily achievable, apparently assumed that all the desired competencies would be found in the Vietnamese and montagnard instructors to be obtained by the Montagnard Affairs Directorate.⁷⁸

Except in its description of a chronic problem with communications, the record does not establish how much of this instruction the trainees absorbed. It does note that the twenty-five radio operators seemed unable to conquer the idiosyncrasies of their World War II—vintage RS-5 and RS-6 radios, and that once deployed into their home districts they sometimes had to use insecure ARVN radio facilities for their reporting.⁷⁹

With the Mountain Scouts, as with CIDG, the station saw itself as making up for the inability of the U.S. Mission to exploit fleeting opportunities to compete with the communists. In December 1961, it commented on USOM’s failure even to begin planning the improvements in the highlands resettlement program mandated a month earlier by the ambassador. It noted that money injected into the GVN in Saigon took up to six months to reach the provinces, if indeed it got there at all. And MAAG “subservience” to the bureaucratic procedures of the Military Assistance program prevented the prompt arming of volunteer irregulars. “The Station would much prefer to have MAAG carry the ball on these . . . programs, but unfortunately if it is to be done immediately as the situation demands, it probably will fall to CIA to implement.” Acting on this rationale, the station proceeded with its effort to help the GVN extend its rural presence.⁸⁰

Counterinsurgency in the Central Highlands

Johnson and Hung had placed the first Mountain Scout teams in the Central Highlands, in Pleiku and Kontum provinces, and in the former Viet Minh stronghold in the coastal provinces of Quang Nam, Quang Ngai, and Binh Dinh. Johnson's replacement, Stuart Methven, fresh from a tour in Laos, shared his predecessor's faith in the efficacy of energy and goodwill, and in the program's potential. He and Hung now started expanding into the other sixteen highland provinces, intending to deploy as many as ten teams per district.⁸¹

Methven had seen in Laos the debilitating absence of a rural government presence in an agricultural society. After some months in Vietnam, he came to see the Viet Cong presence as limited in most areas to the sporadic visits of roving agitprop teams. If there were in fact no permanent VC organization in most villages, the mobile Mountain Scout team seemed well suited to introduce a competitive GVN presence until such time as government resources and efficiency allowed a more thorough integration of the montagnard population.

Accordingly, Methven and Hung adopted and emphasized Ralph Johnson's aim to win the loyalty of the montagnard villager, adding a three-man civic action and propaganda element to each Mountain Scout team. The fifteen combat-trained members were to provide security for this group, whose services included basic medical treatment as well as propaganda and assistance to self-help economic development projects.⁸²

Controversy over Mountain Scout Effectiveness

Methven traveled widely in the teams' operating areas, landing on primitive dirt airstrips to talk to officials ranging from province to village chiefs. Their main theme, "protect us or leave us alone," supported his predisposition to see the villager as not committed to either side, but as ready to support whichever expelled or excluded the other. In his view, the main thing was to establish a GVN presence, to "get something in place." With this mind-set, Methven had only limited sympathy for Ralph Johnson's heavy emphasis on the ideological indoctrination of both team personnel and the villagers they served.⁸³

These visits to district and village headquarters, always unannounced, provided as much confirmation of claimed Mountain Scout activity as the station's advisory role permitted. Everything depended, Methven thought, on the quality of the people recruited by the GVN district chiefs. A few of these officials practiced a counterproductive cronyism, but most of them gave the

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impression of being sufficiently worried about their own security to want to use their CIA-supplied resources to good effect. Where the VC were strongest, a district chief might divert his Mountain Scouts to static security duty at district headquarters, but even this, in Methven's opinion, represented a tangible benefit.⁸⁴

By the end of October 1962, almost 1,100 Mountain Scouts had been trained and deployed; at that point, they had accounted for some 200 VC killed, 34 wounded, and 118 captured, along with some 40 weapons. The Scouts themselves had lost 13 dead, 23 wounded, and 23 captured by the VC. The Scouts' modest successes were supplemented on the political-psychological side by the substantial numbers (station reporting offered no specifics) of montagnards who responded to the teams' visits by casting their lot with the GVN. In addition, incidental intelligence derived from Mountain Scout operations allowed the destruction of a claimed seventeen VC rice caches. During this same period, the district-level intelligence nets set up as an adjunct to the Mountain Scout program produced some 1,500 reports. The station's summary evaluation of this information said it had led to the destruction of eight VC camps, including a training center.⁸⁵

Methven recognized that the Mountain Scout program, however aggressively managed, would not substitute for a permanent GVN presence in the villages and for active participation by their inhabitants. One form that such participation could take was self-defense against the Viet Cong. Methven wanted the Scouts to help set up alarm systems linking montagnard villages to the nearest GVN combat unit, and to improve communications among villages for purposes of mutual support. But this seems to have remained at the level of aspiration. Years later, Methven could not recall any village militias set up in response to Mountain Scout team initiatives.⁸⁶

No one suggested that the Mountain Scouts made a decisive contribution during their first year. However limited their initial achievements, it is not difficult to accept Stuart Methven's restrained judgment that "their presence made a difference." COS John Richardson agreed, at the time, that their record justified the program's further growth, and in November 1962 another 1,500 recruits were about to begin training at a new and larger CIA-run camp at Pleiyit in Pleiku Province. About 100 montagnard graduates of earlier training at the GVN's Social Action School in Hue were now "recalled" to duty (whether voluntarily or not is unknown) for training in the civic action and propaganda functions of the Mountain Scout team. Expansion continued, and by May 1963, the program had deployed 5,300 men in the twenty-one mountain provinces.⁸⁷

Counterinsurgency in the Central Highlands

A Scarcity of Resources

Although marked by considerable anxiety over Viet Cong gains, the atmosphere surrounding the creation of CIDG and the Mountain Scouts was free of the near panic provoked by the GVN collapse in the countryside after the fall of Ngo Dinh Diem in November 1963. But even in 1961, the disparity between GVN lethargy and VC energy had led CIA in Saigon to try, in Bill Colby's phrase, "anything that might work." This proclivity overextended the station's ability to supervise even local, precisely defined activities like that at Buon Enao. The Mountain Scouts, operating autonomously in each of twenty-one provinces under a vaguely articulated mission concept, presented a special challenge. The imposition of even a transient GVN presence in montagnard villages might constitute a net gain, but even the fact, let alone the beneficent effects, of such a presence was often hard to document.

This uncertainty may have influenced COS Richardson when on 1 March 1963 he transferred the station's role in Mountain Scouts to Layton's larger Combined Studies Division. Richardson may have wanted also to centralize in CSD all the paramilitary activities being transferred that year to MACV management.⁸⁸

Layton grumpily resisted this addition to his responsibilities. His reluctance may have reflected the rivalry between Combined Studies Division and the Political Operations Section generated by an emotional commitment to their respective programs. But he also thought that the Vietnamese associated with the Mountain Scouts had inflated their achievements, had misused agency funds, and in some cases simply didn't care about the program. CSD officer Ron Radda, for example, had listened to the Kontum Province chief joke about his own Mountain Scouts, to whose location at the moment he seemed quite indifferent.

Richardson did not yield, and Layton, having finally accepted what he called "custody" of the program, conducted a formal inspection. The results, in his view, justified his reservations: money was "going in all directions" and he had been "unable to find anything in the field that lived up to the glamorous reports." Differing criteria, applied in fluid circumstances, probably accounted for more of this than outright Vietnamese deception. Even so, the result was bad blood between the two sections, with, in Layton's words, Methven and his people "feeling maligned and [CSD] feeling put upon."⁸⁹

Even without allowing for GVN exaggeration, the reports were not in fact notably glamorous. Five months after Layton's complaints, with the program near its maximum size, claimed results totaled only 340 Viet Cong killed in

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action, with 150 VC and 220 weapons captured; 50 tons of rice also had been confiscated. And the premium, if any, in peasant loyalty to the GVN had to be inferred from the results of these security operations.⁹⁰

The CSD takeover of the Mountain Scouts was accompanied by the withdrawal of their three-man civic action and propaganda elements. This action may have reflected CIA dissatisfaction with the amount of attention being given the civilian aspects of the program; headquarters told the station it expected more emphasis on these after the three-man teams were subordinated to Ngo Dinh Can's people in Hue. The station was then to continue supporting them while local units such as CIDG provided security. GVN responsibility for Mountain Scouts now passed from the montagnard Social Affairs Directorate to Colonel Tung's Presidential Survey Office, the home of all GVN unconventional warfare assets, including the Vietnamese Special Forces.⁹¹

Some ambiguity persisted about the residual Mountain Scouts' task. One of Layton's officers described it as a "hunter-killer mission" aimed at engaging small VC units, while another saw it as aimed at intelligence collection, with the teams armed only for self-defense. The latter officer, an Australian seconded to CSD, thus found it anomalous for the district chief to use his teams as a "light strike force." This kind of deployment represented, of course, essentially the "hunter-killer" mission endorsed by this adviser's CIA colleague. But whether used for intelligence or in combat, as soon as they were deployed exclusively against the Viet Cong military, the Mountain Scouts abandoned the civilian part of their original mission. Their prime function, envisioned by Captain Hung and Stuart Methven as the establishment of a benevolent GVN presence among the rural populace, had now disappeared.⁹²

Sea Swallows and Strategic Hamlets

CIA chose the montagnards for the first of its 1961 counterinsurgency initiatives partly because of Ngo Dinh Diem's failure to attract the active commitment of the Buddhist-Confucian ethnic Vietnamese who predominated in the lowlands of Central Vietnam and the Mekong Delta. Although this failure would have to be remedied if the insurgency was to be defeated, the GVN's declining fortunes demanded action producing immediate results. The station therefore began, as we have seen, by recruiting minority groups of known anti-Viet Cong motivation into irregular formations outside the GVN military and internal security apparatus. The first of these units were the CIDG and the Mountain Scouts, whose sponsorship by CIA guaranteed their montagnard participants the means of resisting the Viet Cong. In the case of the CIDG, the American presence offered *de facto* protection from GVN abuses as well.

The CIDG and Mountain Scouts might be contesting Viet Cong use of the highlands for military operations and base areas, but these programs had no potential to reduce VC access to and influence over the lowland Vietnamese majority. Fully aware of this, the station accompanied its support of the minority programs with new efforts to stimulate a more broadly based resistance to the Viet Cong. In late 1961, continuing to work with the GVN to find an effective mobilization formula, it saw in the Vietnamese Catholic population another source of essentially self-motivated potential resistance to the communists.

Almost a million Catholics had come down from the North in 1954 and 1955, some after fighting the Viet Minh there. Fearing a communist takeover

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in the South, CIA had cooperated with the Diem government in the 1950s to employ Catholic villagers in an intelligence staybehind network, using parish priests as some of the principal agents. Scattered from the end of the Annamite chain in lower Central Vietnam to the tip of the Camau peninsula in the far South, these staybehind cells furnished the cadre for two new irregular programs. One, officially labeled Combat Youth but more often referred to by its nickname, the Fighting Fathers, supported local self-defense forces in villages led by militant Catholic priests. The second, called the Combat Intelligence Team, was charged with attacking the communist organization in the countryside.¹

Combat Youth and the “Sea Swallows”

Vietnamese Catholics were no less militantly opposed to atheistic communism than Catholics elsewhere. Diem’s own Catholicism and favoritism toward his fellow communicants encouraged CIA to try creating an archipelago of anti-communist islands out of villages built around Catholic parishes. This constituted not a general mobilization through the episcopal hierarchy but rather a smaller and more selective effort that drew on two sources. One of these was composed of pastors of certain rural Vietnamese parishes whose active loyalty was well established; the best known of these was Brother Bosco, whose parish was located near the coastal town of Phan Rang in Central Vietnam.²

The other locus of the clerical paramilitary program was the militant Chinese Catholic priest Nguyen Loc Hoa, who had adopted a Vietnamese name after an exodus that in 1951 took him and his flock of 300 from southern China, by way of northern Vietnam and Cambodia, all the way to the Camau peninsula. Neither the French nor the GVN had ventured south of Camau City after World War II, and in 1959 President Diem created a special district there, called Hai Yen, for Father Hoa and his parishioners. From this base, Hoa was to contest with the communists for control of an area that extended from the 9th parallel, south of Camau City, to the tip of the peninsula.³

The Viet Cong waited until the following year to react. In 1960, they laid siege to Father Hoa’s headquarters in the village of Binh Hung. Hoa’s parishioners held out and the VC withdrew, but they returned to the attack in January 1961. This time, in a frontal assault, they lost 174 men killed, while the Sea Swallows, as they had come to be known, lost 30.⁴

Their demonstrated competence and courage and their favored position with President Diem made the Sea Swallows early candidates for U.S. assistance. But as civilians, they had no claim on the U.S. Military Assistance pro-

Sea Swallows and Strategic Hamlets

gram, administered by MAAG. Bill Colby filled the gap with one of the U.S. Special Forces teams detailed to the station. He and Colonel Tung watched an “A” detachment of some fourteen men parachute into Binh Hung in early January 1962. The villagers cleared a landing strip, and ordnance deliveries via twin-engined Caribou aircraft began shortly thereafter.⁵

The Sea Swallows were all ethnic Chinese, and the ranks of the emigrants from China were soon increased when Father Hoa began recruiting Catholics from Cholon, the Chinese quarter of Saigon. The ethnic composition of the Sea Swallows offered an opportunity to engage the Nationalist government on Taiwan in counterinsurgency in Vietnam, and CIA promptly set out to exploit it. The resulting agreement brought a Chinese Special Forces team to Binh Hung in April 1962. This created a trilateral advisory arrangement at Binh Hung, with a Vietnamese Special Forces team joining the Nationalists and the CIA-directed U.S. Special Forces unit. As with CIDG in the highlands, the VNSF presence was aimed at asserting GVN control. But Father Hoa, a practiced manipulator of authority, shortly co-opted Tung’s man, Lieutenant Cuong, and it looked to one CIA man as if Cuong soon became more Sea Swallow advocate than GVN agent.⁶

By midsummer 1962, the station had delivered 1,400 weapons of various types, and the number of recruits trained by the combined American-Chinese Special Forces team was approaching 2,000. Father Hoa’s man in Saigon thought the Sea Swallows could serve as the nucleus for a comprehensive Delta pacification program. The CIA case officer probably had the ethnic consideration in mind when he judged this “most optimistic,” but he agreed that pacification had to begin somewhere.⁷

If it could not use Binh Hung as the core of a comprehensive Delta program, the station could and did use it as the focus for the coordinated local application of resources from other U.S. agencies. The USOM medical officer responsible for Camau had previously served in Ban Me Thuot, where he resented being upstaged, as he saw it, by the CIDG medical program. At Binh Hung, however, he soon agreed to support a CIA-designed dispensary. Other U.S. aid officials took similar advantage of improved security conditions throughout Father Hoa’s Hai Yen Special District, and Gil Layton somewhat grudgingly acknowledged their contribution: “Although it is sometimes irksome to have others leap on our bandwagon, we are sincerely grateful for any assistance that we may receive.”⁸

Layton also found occasionally irksome Father Hoa’s continual pleas for increased logistic support. Like the rich man who grew up poor, Hoa thought his small army could never have enough, and he implored every one of his

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numerous American visitors to intervene to fill alleged shortages, especially of munitions. These solicitations always wound up on Layton's desk. Once, when Hoa picked up the refrain during a meeting at Binh Hung, Layton took the good father by the arm and led him on an inspection of the armory, full of unissued weapons and equipment.⁹

CIA support to the other Fighting Fathers began with Brother Bosco, the missionary near Phan Rang. Jack Benefiel, one of Layton's case officers, had by early December already delivered some weapons and ammunition for Bosco's ethnic Vietnamese parishioners. Bosco looked eager to fight the communists; indeed, he wanted his own army, and Benefiel anticipated setting up a training facility like the one being completed in Darlac Province for the Rhadé. By May 1962, almost 1,100 men, excluding the Sea Swallows, had been armed and trained in a program the station called the Catholic Youth. They were deployed in a scattering of villages from Phan Rang west and south to the Cambodian border. The station put U.S. Special Forces "A" detachments in these villages, and came to treat them as extensions of the CIDG program.¹⁰

Taking recruits where it could find them, the station found itself supporting oddly assorted defenders. In one case, Vietnamese Special Forces wanted support for a village in Dinh Tuong Province in the Delta. When a case officer and a VNSF officer visited, they found sixty volunteers from the Cao Dai sect, a syncretic religion of twentieth-century South Vietnamese origin. The volunteers were led by a Catholic, apparently a layman, who had been a captain in the French Army. The CIA man found the arrangement dubious, but VNSF insisted, and he agreed to furnish sixty French bolt-action MAS-36 rifles, with better weapons to be supplied when "the group becomes completely trustworthy."¹¹

Vietnamese suspicion of American intentions was not, it turned out, limited to joint dealings with the montagnards. The station's VNSF counterpart in this venture, a Lieutenant Hanh, looked "still a bit leery" about CIA good faith, but was uninhibited, nevertheless, in his efforts to "graft his share of goodies from the program." And yet, CIA found Captain Tat, in charge of operations and training for VNSF Headquarters, exceptionally effective. Both Tat and Hanh, however, displayed a certain aloofness, especially in the presence of VNSF commander Colonel Tung's younger brother, Captain Trieu, despised by the station as a diligent informer for Tung but otherwise inert.¹²

By the fall of 1962, ten U.S. Special Forces "A" teams and two training centers were devoted to the Catholic Youth program, and the station listed fifteen new sites as ready to begin military training. Almost all of ten more proposed sites were to be found in heavily VC-influenced portions of the Mekong

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Delta and in VC War Zone D, north of Saigon. By the end of the year, more than 4,500 Combat Youth were operating under the command of the Fighting Fathers.¹³

Advising headquarters of its plans for these forces, the station said it had made “securing the Vietnamese/Cambodia border areas” a major goal. In retrospect, the station seems to have been naive in believing that its modest programs could succeed where the massive resources available to ARVN had so far failed. But John Richardson, early in his tour of duty in Saigon, had already come to see direct support to the U.S. military as a major station responsibility. Referring to anticipated VC use of the border with Laos and Cambodia to support regimental-sized operations, the COS noted in August that MACV commander “General Harkins has consistently called attention to the need for more counteraction along these border areas.” Richardson proposed to respond by expanding the station’s village defense program to the border area and by deploying larger numbers of montagnards for intelligence and paramilitary purposes. In so doing, he opened the door to the militarization of the CIDG program, in which the emphasis on community self-defense gradually gave way to the targeting of regular Viet Cong combat formations.¹⁴

Combat Intelligence Teams

The second station-sponsored activity to exploit the anticommunist motivation of Vietnamese Catholics was the Combat Intelligence Team. In November 1961, as both the GVN and the U.S. Mission worked on new proposals in the wake of General Maxwell Taylor’s mission to Saigon, President Diem asked the station to help improve GVN intelligence collection on the Viet Cong. The same staybehind program from which the Fighting Fathers were drawn offered itself as one source of trained people. Each of twelve provincial teams was staffed by a chief organizer who looked after a couple of principal agents and a radio operator, and these teams became the nucleus of the program. Brother Bosco and his parish were home to one team, and the Combat Intelligence program began there, in support of the village defense program. The first team completed training and was deployed in May 1962. What the station later reported as its “unexpected success”—why unexpected is not known, nor what it did—led to the creation of more such units.¹⁵

As the title implied, the station wanted the Combat Intelligence Team both to collect and to exploit intelligence on the clandestine Viet Cong apparatus in the countryside. Its members, as many as eighteen, were to pursue their civilian livelihoods, retrieving their hidden weapons to attack the VC agents they

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identified. The project's case officer saw the activity as one of "fighting fire with fire—i.e., undercover VC cadre would be targeted by undercover GVN cadre."¹⁶

Intended by the station to run their own intelligence nets, the teams appear usually to have lacked the precise information that would have permitted a covert *modus operandi*. Frequent deployment, as many as twelve missions a month, quickly eroded their clandestinity. Within a year, all were operating essentially as standard infantry reconnaissance and combat patrols, searching out VC "combat hamlets" and attacking VC supply parties. In a little more than a year, their results as tabulated by the Vietnamese Special Forces included 201 enemy killed against 15 Combat Intelligence Team personnel lost, with the capture ratio at 51 to 4. Always a small activity, with a peak strength of no more than about thirty-five teams, the Combat Intelligence Teams served as the precursor of the Counter-Terror Teams of 1964, which in turn led to the nationwide deployment of Provincial Reconnaissance Units.¹⁷

The Strategic Hamlet Program

The programs that exploited the anti-Viet Cong potential of ethnic and religious minorities left the main issue, the loyalties of the Buddhist-Confucian majority, still to be confronted. After taking over the station in mid-1960, COS Colby had revived the contact with Ngo Dinh Nhu, which had shrunk to pro forma dimensions under Nick Natsios. Colby and Nhu spent an increasing portion of their weekly meetings discussing the insurgency and ways to combat it. In retrospect, Colby saw Nhu's approval of the CIDG proposal as the germ of the Strategic Hamlet concept, through which Nhu hoped to mobilize the ethnic Vietnamese majority in its own defense. Colby also had one or two meetings on the subject with President Diem, who put more emphasis than Nhu on support to Catholic communities, but otherwise professed to share Nhu's perspective.¹⁸

Why Diem felt the need for a second opinion is a matter for speculation, but toward the end of 1961 he acquired a foreign counterinsurgency adviser of his own—Sir Robert G. K. Thompson, renowned for his role in the British campaign against the Chinese communist insurgents in Malaya. Perhaps Diem wanted reinforcement for his more authoritarian approach, for, as Colby viewed them, he and Thompson were birds of a feather, indifferent to political and social equities and preoccupied with administration "from the top down."¹⁹

Nhu was suspicious of Thompson, whom he regarded as nothing more than an old-school colonial administrator, and he and the COS continued their

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search for a formula that included political and social reform. In October, Nhu announced to a group of province chiefs that he wanted them to launch a “social revolution . . . in which a new hierarchy should be established, not based on wealth or position. The most important people in the village would be the model anti-communist fighters.” The losers would be the “notables and gentry,” many of them “lackeys of the imperialists and colonialists,” who could be “overthrown at once.” This certainly sounded like a house at war with itself, but Colby apparently did not ask Nhu to comment on the anomaly of “overthrowing” the government’s main civilian constituency.²⁰

As it worked out, the Thompson-Diem and Nhu-Colby proposals differed more in theory than in practice. Thompson called first for the eradication of the insurgents, then for social and economic improvements to consolidate the improved morale he expected this to evoke. Nhu and Colby continued to affirm the Strategic Hamlet’s “essentially political core” but accepted Thompson’s order of priorities, in which the completion of security arrangements—moats, perimeter fences, a militia, and so on—preceded political reforms and economic development.²¹

Colby thought that the early success at Buon Enao proved the villagers’ disposition to fight the VC, and the Rhadé, at least, had even refrained from demanding political reforms as a condition of participating in CIDG. Not everyone agreed with this perception of montagnard reliability; Prime Minister Tran Van Huong told Colby he feared that weapons given to village defenders would wind up in the hands of the Viet Cong. Colby replied, as he later recalled it, that the VC already had ample weapons stocks and that in any case, if the peasants could not be trusted to defend themselves, the war was lost. No one, not even a pessimist like Huong, was prepared to admit defeat, and in February 1962 President Diem formally adopted the Strategic Hamlet strategy, establishing an interministerial committee to manage it. In March, Ngo Dinh Nhu became the committee’s chairman.²²

Some members of Ambassador Nolting’s Country Team were offended by the Vietnamese failure to consult the U.S. Mission before launching the program, but Nolting himself quickly adopted it. Colby encouraged him in this, but the ambassador would probably have had little choice. In November 1961, Thompson had already given Maxwell Taylor his version of the Strategic Hamlet concept. By the time Diem decreed the new program three months later, the Thompson paper had already received a favorable review from President Kennedy.²³

MAAG chief General Lionel McGarr, by contrast, found the idea outrageous. Like his predecessors in Vietnam, he saw the problem as strictly a military one, the solution to which required aggressive mobile operations and a

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single GVN military command line. Accordingly, he saw no legitimate civilian role in counterinsurgency operations. To divert military resources to territorial defense, in his view, was to waste them in a losing cause. But Nolting and Washington spoke with one voice on the matter, and military advisers in the provinces got orders to help the program succeed.²⁴

Bill Colby's enthusiasm for the Strategic Hamlet concept was not accompanied by any desire for a CIA role in implementing it. On 21 February 1962, he described to headquarters the "very heavy pressure" coming from the mission to exploit the station's experience with the various paramilitary programs by expanding into Strategic Hamlet support. Colby noted that any significant contribution would require at least 200 more Special Forces personnel, for whom the station would be hard pressed to find supervisors. Ambassador Nolting had just agreed to provide active leadership for a coordinated American effort, and rather than commit more CIA resources, Colby proposed getting General Paul Harkins, McGarr's replacement, to make a larger direct MACV investment in this joint program.²⁵

The Strategic Hamlet in Theory and Practice

With the rest of the U.S. Mission mobilized in support of the Strategic Hamlet effort, the station was free to devote the bulk of its resources to its other programs. Colby continued to monitor Ngo Dinh Nhu's understanding of Strategic Hamlet progress and to distribute the reporting on it received from independent station sources. These sources tended to emphasize nonfeasance and misfeasance in Strategic Hamlet construction, and Colby later acknowledged "obvious failures and fakeries." The problems were induced, he thought, by Nhu's insistence on speed and by the pro forma efforts of bewildered officials trying to follow his "ethereal" instructions.²⁶

Perhaps harboring some proprietary feelings about a program to which he had devoted so much of his time with Nhu, Colby continued to support it. He offered no evidence for his retrospective claim that the GVN had recognized and gradually corrected the Strategic Hamlet's failings. Nevertheless, he continued to credit the program with having provided the basis for a coordinated, nationwide response to the Viet Cong at the village level.²⁷

In fact, the program was impeded not only by local failures of implementation but by Nhu's arbitrary management style. Nhu insisted that a successful Strategic Hamlet would rely on its own resources. This self-reliance would apply not just to amenities like schools but even to armaments, and he told Colby that weapons should not be given to the villagers, but only loaned to

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them for six months. In that time, the local militia should have captured enough weaponry from the Viet Cong to allow returning the equipment loaned to it. Colby thought this approach abdicated an opportunity for the government to use American material support to sell the program to the villagers. But Nhu insisted on minimum U.S. aid and won Diem's support for his position. Years later, Colby recalled this as the only example in his own experience with Nhu of the malign influence that many observers claimed he had always exerted on the president.²⁸

Although Colby did not take them into account, the program faced obstacles more fundamental than confused local officials and a Spartan approach to logistics. An official of the Ministry of Civic Action put his finger on one when he asserted early in 1962 that the program had to fail: the existing provincial leadership, itself rich and well educated, was supposed to help create a new order in which wealth and education no longer determined social status. As for the peasants, the official thought they saw the GVN's struggle with the VC as a defense of property. Having none themselves and no prospect of acquiring any, most of them lacked a compelling reason to join the fight.²⁹

Even Ngo Dinh Nhu adopted this analysis when he addressed GVN officials in Phan Thiet, in Central Vietnam, in March 1962. Calling for full application of the constitution and the law in completed Strategic Hamlets, he noted that the law required restoration to its original owners of land confiscated and redistributed by the Viet Cong. This was "a very delicate issue," he said, for if the peasant beneficiaries of this largesse learned of GVN intentions to dispossess them, they would turn to the VC. The solution was to proceed with other phases of hamlet construction for a month or more before tackling this problem. But even then, in the absence of new legislation, "the existing law remains valid." In a session with Colby, Nhu claimed to have posed the problem to numerous officials, without result, as "the prospects of new legislation were difficult." So much for overthrowing the "gentry and the notables."³⁰

Looking for a way around the resistance of his landowning constituency, Nhu outlined for Colby an idea that suggested some understanding of the Viet Cong technique of winning peasant cooperation with a calculated blend of positive and negative incentives. He suggested a scheme whereby peasants holding land distributed by the Viet Cong might hold it provisionally, perhaps for ninety days, while they induced relatives in the VC to bring in their weapons and change sides. But Nhu did not address the legal problem of making this tenure permanent. The government therefore continued to labor under the burden of a regressive land tenure policy, and the Strategic Hamlet as an instrument of social revolution remained an empty shell.³¹

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Whatever his attachment to what Bill Colby called the Strategic Hamlet's "political core," Nhu had by spring 1962 fully assimilated the emphasis given by Diem and Robert Thompson to the "military problem, which is the most important at this moment." The immediate objective was to disrupt Viet Cong access to the villagers, forcing the VC to assemble for attacks on defended hamlets, where they would expose themselves to ARVN counterattack.³²

Except where the GVN could quarantine the population with a barrier of troops, the success of this approach depended on the active participation of villagers who shared the perception of the communists as an oppressive, alien presence. The difficulty was that many villagers had from childhood viewed things "through the prism of Viet Cong ideas, beliefs, and prejudices." Indeed, there were families that had supported the Viet Minh from its inception in 1941. Gerald Hickey, an American student of Vietnamese village life, thought that generating allegiance to the Saigon government in such people would "require extraordinary measures applied over a long period of time." And, in fact, the GVN travel and resources controls that accompanied the Strategic Hamlet program generated such animosity that Robert Thompson recommended suspending them.³³

Thompson did not ask whether these controls, so essential to the British campaign against the insurgency in Malaya, could successfully be dispensed with in Vietnam. He did address the question of airstrikes on suspected Viet Cong locations, arguing that, although as many as a third of the resulting casualties would probably be civilian, these attacks were essential to prevent the enemy from massing for attack. Thompson left the matter at that, without asking whether the political damage inflicted by this collateral damage might outweigh its military benefit.³⁴

The mixed intentions of the Ngo brothers and their advisers resulted in an essentially coercive approach that tended to alienate at least those of the program's intended beneficiaries who did not see the Viet Cong as a mortal enemy. In this, the Strategic Hamlet came to resemble Diem's abortive agrovillage project of 1959, which had been characterized by large-scale, compulsory relocation and uncompensated labor. The exactions imposed under the Strategic Hamlet were less draconian, at least where the United States supported it, but the new program also largely failed to attract voluntary participation.³⁵

Driven perhaps by the intractability of his problems, Nhu's disquisitions became increasingly grandiose. In March, he assured Colby and visiting Far East Division Chief Desmond FitzGerald that more than 10,000 strategic hamlets would be completed in 1962. Talking about the security of the villagers and their property, Nhu echoed Diem's confidence that the inhabitants of vil-

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lages attacked by the VC could simply “disappear into the countryside.” They would first “secrete their valuables” in a place that, out of respect for the farmer’s “personalist right,” would be unknown to government officials. And if the VC burned down a man’s house, the government would build him a new one.³⁶

Nhu seems to have assumed, in all this, precisely the dedication and competence in South Vietnamese civil servants whose lack he had continually deplored with all his CIA interlocutors. But he had never displayed much understanding of organizational mechanics; as Colby put it, he had “no sense of the reality” of problems at the implementation level.³⁷

Its weaknesses did not mean that the Strategic Hamlet program was everywhere a total failure. For one thing, it disposed of very large material resources, mostly American, which offered the affected peasants an improved standard of living. An American delegation visiting Cu Chi District, west of Saigon, in March 1962 found the security situation improved over the previous October. In the hamlets being evaluated, heavy concentration on civic action and civic organization had accompanied the construction of defenses. The war there had not yet been won, but progress was greater than in Binh Duong Province, north of Saigon, where, for example, many of the residents of one Strategic Hamlet had been forcibly moved in. Eighty-five had already escaped, while only twenty-one people had come over to the GVN from the VC.³⁸

Even where the Strategic Hamlet program provoked peasant hostility, it created genuine problems for the VC political and military organization in the countryside. As in the 1950s, with the Anticommunist Denunciation Campaign, the sheer scale of the associated military and police clearing operations inflicted severe losses on the communists. In this respect, if in no other, the program merited Bill Colby’s faith in it as a coordinated, nationwide response to the insurgency. By Hanoi’s later admission, GVN security operations expelled the overt VC presence from many hamlets and villages, to which subsequent access had to be surreptitious. Meanwhile, the introduction of the helicopter-borne attack in early 1962 multiplied the impact of GVN military operations for several months, until the communists adapted their military tactics to prevent ARVN from exploiting its new and superior mobility.³⁹

To quarantine the villagers was one thing, to attract their voluntary allegiance another. Many working-level advisers were persuaded that the Strategic Hamlet program was failing to instill the political motivation envisioned by Colby and Ngo Dinh Nhu. But leadership in Saigon, both U.S. and GVN, wanted to see progress, and it relied on inflated GVN statistics to bolster its optimism. In fact, except among militant communities such as the Catholic,

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the program relied primarily on coercion, not just against the Viet Cong but against the peasantry that the GVN had set out to reclaim.⁴⁰

The only direct CIA support to Strategic Hamlets came in the form of training and weapons for some of Ngo Dinh Nhu's Republican Youth, who were to be used to bolster hamlet defenses. As of November 1962, 1,625 such cadres had been issued weapons upon completion of what the station called "advanced" training; no reporting on their deployment or subsequent service has been found.⁴¹

Mutual Incomprehension

Despite its limited participation in the construction of Strategic Hamlets, the station continued to serve as the principal sounding board, on the U.S. side, for Nhu's perorations on counterinsurgency. In September, Nhu wrote to COS Richardson to introduce his "grand design" for a "guerrilla infrastructure" composed of the Strategic Hamlet program and a guerrilla organization, the *Biet Cach*, "compartmented from the population." Nhu was vague about the structure and mission of the guerrilla element, which he asserted had been in action for the past two years. He defined it mainly in terms of its members' spiritual values, and explicitly distinguished it from both local self-defense units and the counterguerrilla forces of the regular army.⁴²

Richardson replied that he found himself "in full agreement" with Nhu's letter, and it may be that he understood what Nhu meant by the term *Biet Cach*. Nevertheless, he went on to cite as means to their joint goal such military options as Special Forces operations and air strikes, which Nhu had seemingly excluded from his new concept. In retrospect, Nhu seems to have been thinking more about the problem of motivating the anti-VC struggle than about military organization and tactics. But his abstruse, almost mystical, language never addressed or even acknowledged the problem of implementation, and it is easy to see why Richardson might have interpreted the "grand design" in a more concrete, if apparently mistaken, frame of reference.⁴³

In any case, by September 1962 Richardson had come to see the struggle in almost exclusively military terms. Noting General Harkins's frequent calls for more action to interdict the Vietnamese border with Laos and Cambodia, he proposed using the station's paramilitary assets to help achieve this. He asked Washington to raise the Mountain Scouts authorization from 1,600 to 12,000 men, and told Nhu that CIDG expansion should be redirected at control of the border with Cambodia. The COS called for intensified military pressure wherever the VC dominated; Binh Duong Province, containing part of VC War

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Zone D, should be reclaimed within a year. "The time has come," Richardson wrote, "when we should no longer accept the thought that the Viet Cong need to be allowed to retain more or less stable and semi-permanent safe haven areas or bases in South Vietnam."⁴⁴

With the contest defined as a purely military phenomenon, and with the helicopter-borne infantry attack keeping the VC off balance, Richardson came to believe that victory was in sight. Doubtless influenced by General Harkins's relentless optimism, he returned from an early September 1962 trip to Central Vietnam with the "impression that Kontum Province is fighting a winning war against the Viet Cong." Ralph Johnson, the Mountain Scouts enthusiast, had only months earlier described the province as threatened with collapse. But Richardson now heard that the enemy was being pushed away from the key north-south communications axis, now "largely under GVN control." Local GVN officials reported high morale in Kontum Province, and in Quang Tri, just below the 17th parallel, the province chief asserted that there were no more than 200 VC in the entire province. The picture was less bright in Quang Ngai, with its estimated 5,000 Viet Cong troops and three regimental-sized units. But here as elsewhere the war was "in the course of being won."⁴⁵

Whether Nhu shared this perception is not clear. His conversations with Richardson retained their theoretical cast, and his characteristically obscure language and convoluted reasoning resisted interpretation. When he descended to the level of practical prescription, Nhu's isolation from the real world became painfully clear. In October, for example, he proposed an intensified commando effort against VC safe havens and bases and what he imagined were enemy "routes of travel along the ridges of the Annamite Chain." No one who had ever tried to approach these peaks would contemplate using them as a highway, but Richardson apparently accepted the notion as serious when he relayed it without comment to headquarters.⁴⁶

Despite his own concentration on the military aspect of the conflict, Richardson continued to write admiringly of Nhu's left-bank political and economic theorizing: Nhu was "serious-minded and no playboy in any sense of the word. He finds particular pleasure in analyzing the subtleties and intricacies of the problems of war and of the political chess game." In September, Richardson summarized, again without comment, an abstruse Nhu discourse on the opposing forces of centralization and decentralization, the application of which in their "maximum intensity" would constitute a formula of world-wide validity.⁴⁷

Meanwhile, however unpopular the Strategic Hamlet program among the peasants, and however temporary the advantage conferred by the heliborne

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infantry attack, the burst of GVN energy these represented sufficed to jolt Hanoi into accelerated support to the insurgency. On 6 December 1962, the Politburo voted to “dispatch combat forces to South Vietnam to build our mobile main force army and our combat arms and combat support units.”⁴⁸

This decision came at a time when the Diem government already faced two decisive challenges to its survival. In January 1963, Viet Cong forces signaled their recapture of the military initiative when they humiliated a superior ARVN force at Ap Bac in the Mekong Delta. At the same time, urban Buddhist unrest distracted the GVN from expanding the Strategic Hamlet program. Repressive action against activist monks and their supporters claimed all the government’s attention, and by May the counterinsurgency campaign had lapsed into paralysis.⁴⁹

The Force Populaire

The Strategic Hamlet program represented only one of the two hamlet security schemes launched by the GVN in late 1961. It was probably not by coincidence that, just as Ngo Dinh Nhu began experimenting with Strategic Hamlets in the south, his brother Ngo Dinh Can, always jealous of his authority in Central Vietnam, made a bid for CIA support of his own counterinsurgency program. In November, a Can loyalist and National Assembly deputy named Hoang Trong Ba delivered to Jim Mullen, the CIA officer in Hue, a proposal for a project called the Force Populaire (FP).⁵⁰

Like the Strategic Hamlet program, the Force Populaire concept purported to offer a blueprint for securing the loyalty and security of the rural population, but it differed in important respects from Nhu’s program. In fact, it more nearly resembled the civic action concept introduced by Ed Lansdale in 1955. Like Lansdale, and also like Mullen’s friend Captain Hung in the montagnard context, Can and Ba saw the peasant as not merely indifferent to the GVN but as positively antagonistic to it. In this, they implicitly rejected the basis of the Strategic Hamlet program, which took for granted a peasant disposition to cooperate with the government against the Viet Cong.⁵¹

Obviously borrowing from Viet Cong proselyting technique, Assemblyman Ba proposed to bypass the local GVN apparatus with highly trained and heavily indoctrinated cadres deployed into the countryside. He expected the energy and goodwill of these cadres, and presumably the status they derived from Ngo Dinh Can’s personal sponsorship, to inspire the villagers to participate in community projects. The peasants would then continue on a volunteer basis the project launched under cadre leadership. The proposed *modus operandi*

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implicitly assumed the absence of pro-GVN sympathies in the countryside. It reflected the conviction of Can and his entourage that questions of ideology, GVN corruption, and even protection from VC attack or coercion were secondary to the need to compete with the dynamic, personalized approach of VC cadres living and proselyting in the villages. Under the Force Populaire concept, which in this respect resembled that of the Mountain Scouts, its cadres' work would be complete when a hamlet or village had its own resident FP activists and a volunteer self-defense unit. The team, numbering as few as two or three men, could then move on, beginning again in another hamlet or village.⁵²

Mullen's description of the Force Populaire methodology revealed its extraordinary demands on the cadres. In order to assure that family ties and obligations did not corrupt cadre objectivity, the teams were to be deployed outside their home villages. But this meant that they began as strangers among a presumptively hostile peasantry. Ba's plan therefore anticipated several "very hard" initial weeks in a hamlet. When the small FP teams made their first contacts, they were to find a place to sleep without imposing on the villagers' hospitality. Even this cold refuge they should not use, at first, staying on the move to avoid attack. During the day, the cadres were to conceal their weapons and begin doing good, "planting, harvesting, cutting brush . . . killing rats, giving haircuts, etc.," when not patrolling or on watch.⁵³

Mullen seems not to have regarded this agenda as excessively ambitious. Nor did he question the practicability of keeping weapons both concealed and close at hand in an area that the inhabitants knew intimately and the teams did not. But he saw other obstacles, including the shortage of competent supervisory personnel and the low reputation of local GVN officials.⁵⁴

Members of the National Assembly looked to Mullen like better candidates for program leadership. They had political stature and their legislative duties were "not onerous." But only four of them could be persuaded to leave Saigon, and supervision remained a problem. Using the bureaucracy, mired as it was in colonial-style practice, was out of the question; indeed, its rigidity and sloth were the very reasons for the effort. In Mullen's phrase, to get the incumbent set of functionaries to work with the peasantry on such an intensely personal basis would be "like teaching an elephant to sing."⁵⁵

Whatever his contempt for his own bureaucrats, Can could not entirely dispense with them, and province-level officials were to recruit the first cadres. Given the purpose of the program, to create a surrogate to these officials' own authority, it is not surprising that their cooperation left something to be desired. Of Can's instructions to them to recruit with "great selectivity," Mul-

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len remarked that “this didn’t sink in very well.” He presumably had in mind the group of 366 recruits, of whom 22 quit upon discovering what the program required of them, while 97 others declared themselves available only for desk work.⁵⁶

Poor recruiting practice probably also reflected the same kind of confusion that Nhu had engendered in the officials he charged with launching the Strategic Hamlet program. President Diem visited Hue during the Tet holidays in January 1962, and Ngo Dinh Can’s people used the occasion to try to indoctrinate province chiefs and other officials in FP theory and practice. But Mullen thought that “few of the visitors really understood the . . . concept.” And almost a year later, the communication problem was “by no means solved.” Mullen acknowledged the difficulty, but did not attempt to judge its effect on the program’s effectiveness, and it is not clear whether he thought it remediable.⁵⁷

The FP avoided one weakness of the Strategic Hamlet by drawing its working-level cadres from the peasantry, not from the professional bureaucracy. But the bureaucracy selected the cadresmen, who had at the very least to avoid antagonizing it while they pursued the FP agenda. Then and later, Mullen thought this to have been a manageable problem, despite what he acknowledged as the “*cosa nostra* . . . feudalistic” style of the program’s management. He believed that the prospect of earning Can’s favor would suffice to attract energetic cadres, and that the material benefits derived from successful self-help projects would motivate the peasant to resist Viet Cong propaganda and coercion.⁵⁸

For reasons like these, the Force Populaire looked better to Mullen than Nhu’s Strategic Hamlets, and the energy and commitment displayed by Assemblyman Ba and by three ARVN captains assigned to the program—one of whom was Captain Hung, the originator of the Mountain Scout program—supported his optimism. From the beginning, Mullen made a practice of visiting FP cadre teams in the field; here, too, the level of activity persuaded him that the program represented something more than an organizational Potemkin village.⁵⁹

Although Colby was already working with Nhu on the Strategic Hamlet concept, he readily agreed to support the potentially competing FP; he was disposed, he later recalled, to “encourage anything that looked as if it might work.” Accordingly, he approved the modest logistic support that Mullen wanted: light weapons, air transportation for trainees and for supervisory visits, and a subsidy for the training installation at Hue.⁶⁰

As a matter of principle, Mullen and then Colby rejected Vietnamese efforts to get the station to pay FP salaries; they reasoned that Can could demonstrate

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his seriousness of purpose only by making a substantial investment of his own. Can accepted this division of responsibility, and Assemblyman Ba announced the opening of the Thua Thien Province chapter on 27 November 1961. Training began for the first 150 recruits, and by January 1962, 500 cadres were ready for deployment. By September, 1,065 cadresmen were in the field, fleshing out their teams with local recruitment. In October 1962, almost 6,000 people were in the field, and Ba was working toward filling the complement of just over 7,000 authorized by President Diem. By November, the agency had furnished 5,000 light weapons, some military training, office equipment, and a \$13,750 contribution to the FP training center.⁶¹

The Force Populaire went further than the Mountain Scouts had done in promoting village self-defense. Where the Mountain Scouts relied on improved communications and the hope of quicker GVN military response to VC attack, the FP began in September 1962 to arm participating villagers. A month later, almost 500 defenders had received weapons in some fifteen hamlets around Hue. Provincial officials uneasy with the principle of an unpaid citizen militia got Assemblyman Ba's agreement to modify the FP *modus operandi* in such hamlets, leaving one cadreman in place when the rest of the mobile team moved on. Mullen recognized the risk that the militia's commitment might flag, or that such defenders might become VC assassination targets. But he thought that "if village self-defense is possible at all, this program seems to have the best chance of achieving it."⁶²

Mullen did not have the resources for a rigorous tabulation of results, and the anecdotal information supplied by the Vietnamese did not suffice for a definitive judgment of the program's worth. By late 1962, the first defenders had killed a dozen Viet Cong, but Mullen found more significant their inhibiting effect on the VC presence: there were hamlets in Thua Thien Province to which the Viet Cong had previously made weekly visits, but which Mullen understood had now gone unmolested for six months. Equally encouraging to Mullen were cases—their frequency unknown—of disillusioned Viet Cong rallying to hamlets defended by the FP, and of intelligence information volunteered to FP cadresmen.⁶³

The Force Populaire vs. the GVN

Although selected by provincial officials and working on behalf of the GVN, the mobile Force Populaire teams were directed, in Mullen's words, "against the VC, not for or against a given local administration. If the FP became involved in local politics, its freedom to work on its main target unhampered by local

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officials would disappear.” Mullen quoted the chief of a four-team group in Quang Ngai as telling a meeting that his group was “‘paying the government’s debt to the people’ in the village where [it] was working.” Another cadre at the meeting agreed, saying that “the only friends we’ve got are the people.”⁶⁴

Mullen perceived a “widespread antipathy, which deepens in spots to intense hatred, between the poorer peasants and the hamlet and village management, consisting of the chiefs, the police, the local landlords . . . and the [Self-Defense Corps].” Every FP team confronted an insoluble dilemma: it could not win the peasants’ confidence if it worked closely with the establishment, but it often engaged in tasks that required the cooperation of the local authorities. And this cooperation could not be taken for granted, because these authorities were often complicit in activity such as illegal gambling that they feared the FP cadres would report to Can’s men in Hue. Nevertheless, the FP presence normally resulted in improved security from VC encroachments, and this tended to keep the atmosphere reasonably amicable. Mullen remarked that “the strain on [FP] morale induced by this equivocal position can easily be imagined.”⁶⁵

It appeared to Jim Mullen that this position was precisely what Ngo Dinh Can intended. People in his entourage remarked to Mullen that in the FP “we are breeding a corps of revolutionaries.” Mullen added that “Can is said to be aware of this and to approve it. . . . He has been quoted as saying he expects to draw his new party cadre from the FP while weeding out much of the older, now ranker, growth.”⁶⁶

Can’s entourage insisted that one of his purposes was to fight corruption, and that he was using the FP in some unspecified way to effect “basic reforms.” Mullen saw the anomaly:

There is something incongruous in this picture. Can’s own reputation in the economic field is not so savory as to lend credence to the idealism now attributed to him. We can believe that, as a shrewd politician, he may well want to reform his party and get rid of a lot of very dead wood without greatly changing its lucrative practices. He may well also have concluded that crude tactics to squeeze the peasant are poor policy when the government is locked in a life and death struggle which these peasants’ loyalties will decide, but this does not necessarily mean he is prepared to press for a true revolution at the expense of his own interests, such as . . . thoroughgoing land reform.⁶⁷

Nevertheless, the FP program, in Mullen’s view, contained “the seed of genuine social revolution: in recruiting peasants to run it he is flying in the face

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of Vietnamese traditions and perhaps preparing the way for more change than he really wants. . . . But Can obviously believes he can control all this.” Mullen clearly doubted it, but he recommended nevertheless that the program be expanded to all of South Vietnam “if the aim remains to create cadre capable of beating the VC at their own game as the FP is beginning to do.”⁶⁸

Their inherently competitive programs soon led to open conflict between Can and Nhu. When the latter visited Hue in early June 1962, they had what Interior Minister Bui Van Long later called a “bitter exchange” over counter-insurgency strategy, with “Can emphasizing the practical merits of his solution and Nhu expounding his own theoretical approach.” Can offered to support Strategic Hamlet construction in Central Vietnam if Nhu reciprocated regarding FP expansion into the South, but he later instructed his staff to boycott Nhu’s program.⁶⁹

Bill Colby did not have to deal directly with the conflict between Nhu and Can. He had returned to Washington in the summer of 1962, leaving John Richardson to cope with the problem created by station support to Can’s program. The question flared up in early September, just after Diem’s approval of a Force Populaire central committee independent of provincial authorities and empowered to draw funds from the national treasury. Nhu accused his brother Can of having misled Diem into supporting “a new sect, a private army,” and complained to the new COS of this “reactionary development.” Richardson could only reply that he was not in a position to deny assistance to Can. Nhu agreed that it was a matter to be straightened out among Vietnamese, but made clear his unhappiness with CIA support to the competition.⁷⁰

As of late November 1962, the station said it still intended to support a major FP expansion. It anticipated a total strength of some 14,000 men, divided equally between mobile teams and the resident cadres they recruited while working in the hamlets. But Richardson’s commitment seems to have flagged—the September session with Nhu may have been a factor—and station support declined along with it.⁷¹

Mullen left Hue in December, returning to Vietnam in the spring of 1963 for a tour of duty in Saigon. By this time, Diem had vested responsibility for FP expansion outside Central Vietnam in the Ministry of Interior, and Mullen took up liaison with that ministry. Still fervently committed to the program, he found DCOS David Smith and covert action chief Clifford Strathern actively hostile to it. Its goose was definitively cooked when the station discovered that Hue was skimming the funds advanced to support the FP. By this time, in any case, GVN action to expand it nationwide had limped nearly to a halt as the 1963 Buddhist crisis absorbed the energies of the entire government.⁷²

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The Apogee

The six counterinsurgency programs sponsored or encouraged by CIA in concert with the Diem government all achieved their greatest effectiveness by late 1962. Thereafter, a variety of causes inhibited further progress and in the larger programs gravely undermined early successes. The limitations of agency staffing and logistic resources required transfer to MACV management of the four programs entirely dependent on agency material support, and this resulted, in two cases, in the fatal compromise of their basic operating concepts.

The two smallest programs, the Combat Youth and Combat Intelligence Teams, relied on the durable anticommunist fervor of the Catholic minority, whose favored status in the Diem government spared it the reciprocal suspicions that afflicted the efforts with other minorities. With these advantages, the Catholics could withstand the departure of the agency presence. But CIDG and the Mountain Scouts required, not merely for success but for survival, a delicate balance between political and military equities, as well as sensitive mediation of the traditional mutual antipathies of montagnards and ethnic Vietnamese. The genius of the agency people running these programs lay in their ability to balance the equities and ameliorate the antagonisms; this capacity could not be expected, and was usually absent, in the soldiers who assumed management responsibility on behalf of MACV.

The two largest programs, Strategic Hamlets and the Force Populaire, were originated by and closely associated with Ngo Dinh Diem and his brothers Nhu and Can, and this very identification doomed them to disappear when Diem's generals overthrew him in November 1963. Even had Diem's regime survived, the record of the agency's experience with both programs, and especially the intimate CIA connection with the Force Populaire, suggests that irreducible structural problems would have doomed them to failure.

The Mountain Scouts and CIDG posed a different question. Identified more with CIA than with the Diem government, they did in fact survive the transition to military government in late 1963. But by this time their original purposes were already being compromised, with CIA acquiescence, by a new emphasis on tactical support to conventional military operations. The process of their decay will emerge in an account of Operation Switchback, the exercise that transferred support and management of the station's paramilitary activities to the U.S. Army.

Operation Switchback

The transfer of CIDG and other paramilitary activities to MACV control was inevitable, despite widespread apprehension in CIA that this would result in distorting the programs' respective missions. The Directorate of Plans (later the Directorate of Operations) lacked the personnel and organizational resources to manage activities of this size without serious erosion of its ability to conduct worldwide intelligence collection and covert action operations. But the decision had other antecedents as well. The failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion in April 1961 made the Kennedy administration skeptical of the agency's competence to run a military operation, even if it wanted to, and not everyone at CIA did want to; some officials there objected to involvement in overt programs even where the agency possessed unique competence. And when it assigned covert action responsibilities to the CIA in the spring of 1961, the new Kennedy administration had probably not contemplated the arming of almost 40,000 men.¹

The first and largest of the CIA paramilitary programs in Vietnam, the Citizens' (later Civilian) Irregular Defense Groups, was only six months old when Washington decided to transfer U.S. management from CIA to General Harkins's MACV. In May 1962, as already noted, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara gave Far East Division Chief Desmond FitzGerald an open-ended commitment of U.S. Special Forces personnel and Defense Department funding for the paramilitary programs collectively labeled "CIDG activities." On 28 June, the so-called Special Group, the administration's interagency committee for covert action, met to consider the agency's request for almost \$10 million to supplement the \$2.5 million it had budgeted for FY 1963. At this session, DCI John A. McCone suggested that "it may be advisable for DOD [Depart-

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ment of Defense] to take the lead in CIA counterinsurgency programs, with CIA in support, rather than the reverse situation which now obtains.”²

Paul Nitze, assistant secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, concurred, and the DCI asked the station to identify paramilitary assets appropriate for transfer. The station then started planning the turnover of CIDG training camps to MACV, working on the assumption that CIA would conduct the payroll and logistics functions through the remainder of FY 1963. Secretary McNamara approved transferring DOD funds to the agency at a meeting in July 1962. The same meeting coined the term *Operation Switchback*, a misnomer that implied previous DOD custody of the affected programs.³

In Saigon, MACV commander General Paul Harkins—always unsympathetic to military participation in counterinsurgency operations—had misgivings about military absorption of the station’s paramilitary work. Under pressure from his immediate superior, U.S. Pacific forces commander Admiral Harry Felt, to take over full control, Harkins said he thought the time “not ripe.” He described the station as entirely responsive to his requirements, adding that “cooperative operational procedures were in effect which would serve as a model for further ventures of the same type.” Noting the agency’s manpower limitations and consequent need for military supplementation, Harkins generously acknowledged CIA’s “operational know-how.” He also pointed out the agency’s success in developing informal arrangements with the GVN that allowed CIA to retain control of U.S. resources until the point of their direct application in the field.⁴

Harkins went further in early August, telling Admiral Felt and Washington that the station must continue to deal with the GVN on the policy aspects of its counterinsurgency programs. Using language supplied him by the station, he specified that this applied both to program expansion and to the management of irregulars already armed and trained. The station assured headquarters that it expected support for this position also from Colonel George Morton, the new commander of U.S. Special Forces in Vietnam. Morton, the station thought, was strongly persuaded of the need for the chief of station to handle the political aspects of CIDG.⁵

DCI McCone had already inserted into the July memorandum of understanding with Defense a passage requiring respect for the “well-established liaison relationships with GVN officials both in Saigon and at the provincial level.” MACV would gradually assume some of these, but only as worked out with the station. This somewhat ambiguous formula did not appeal to Admiral Felt, who was “adamant,” in a message from Honolulu to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, that General Harkins “establish his own liaison concerning irregu-

Operation Switchback

lar programs that are his sole responsibility.” Washington never endorsed this approach, but Felt’s philosophy would in practice prevail.⁶

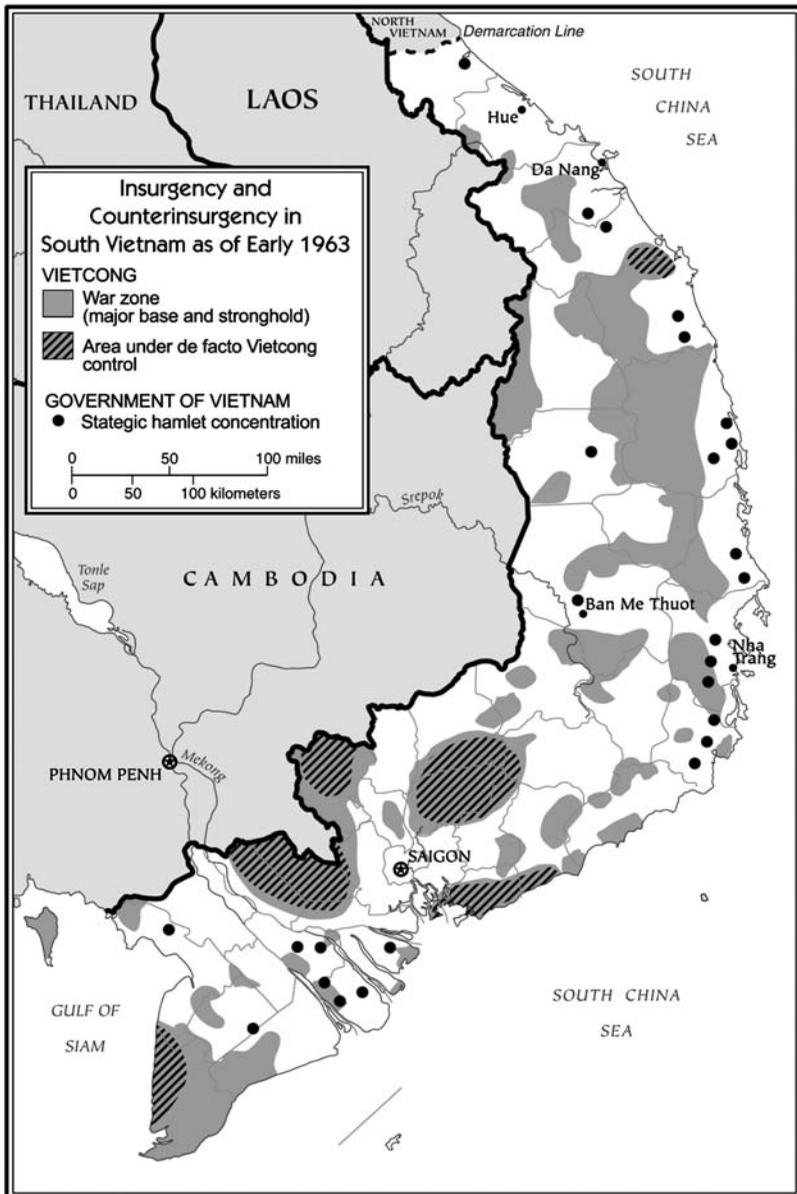
Harkins’s acknowledgment of CIA administrative flexibility implicitly recognized the procedural rigidities that were to hobble military administration of the CIA programs. These first became evident in the form of a request to CIA Headquarters from the Department of the Army. The army, with a heavy commitment of Special Forces, anticipated \$7.7 million in FY 1963 Switchback costs in addition to the nearly \$12.5 million total budgeted for the agency. It now asked the agency to add the army’s \$7.7 million requirement to the CIA request for DOD funds, explaining that it could legally transfer these funds to CIA, to build needed warehouse facilities and establish a sixty-day stock level, but could not itself legally disburse them directly for the same purposes.⁷

Poor communication within and between agencies did not help. To the agency’s dismay, it turned out that oral commitments from Paul Nitze and Robert McNamara did not suffice to open Pentagon coffers. In December, CIA submitted a funding requirement for nearly \$25 million in addition to the \$7.7 million requested by the agency for ultimate use by the army. Deputy Defense Secretary Roswell Gilpatric summarily rejected all but the \$7.7 million for the army. He said he feared that the agency was proceeding on the “erroneous assumption that the Secretary of Defense had agreed to provide the required funds from Defense sources.” This is, of course, following the precedent of Defense Department funding for agency management of the irregular Hmong army in Laos, precisely what McNamara had done.⁸

This kind of discord typified the administration of Operation Switchback. But there were problems also at the operational level. After the key man in the creation of the Rhadé program briefed two general officers at the Pentagon on Switchback problems at Buon Eno, McCone had second thoughts. By December, he was asking whether in fact it served the U.S. interest to make the change. But the institutional and political pressures in its favor overrode the prospect of severe difficulties in implementation, and preparations for the transfer continued.⁹

New Management, New Camps, and a Modified Mission

Operation Switchback did not, as of late 1962, include the Mountain Scouts, and Gil Layton was to continue running their training camp at Pleiyit in Pleiku Province. The station also proposed to continue managing U.S. support to 5,000 members of the 7,100-man Force Populaire, and to the Combat Intel-



Areas of communist control and allied counterinsurgency as of early 1963. CIA and U.S. government definitions of GVN and Viet Cong “control” changed over time, and comparative maps like this one only approximate the progress of the competition in the countryside.

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ligence Teams and armed Republican Youth deployed in Strategic Hamlets. The Combat Youth, sponsored by the so-called Fighting Fathers, were now regarded as offshoots of CIDG, and slated for transfer to MACV.¹⁰

Transfer of supervisory responsibility did not necessarily imply a new mission for the forces involved, and nothing in CIA records suggests that Washington officials proposed any such changes, either for CIDG or for the programs the station intended to retain. The initiative for this took place in Saigon, where, as already noted in the context of his discussions with Ngo Dinh Nhu, COS John Richardson had adopted support to military operations as the overriding task of the station's paramilitary programs.¹¹

Accordingly, the COS launched the expansion of CIDG to the border with Cambodia and Laos, and deployed larger numbers of montagnards for intelligence and military purposes. In so doing, he opened the door to the militarization of CIDG, in which the original emphasis on community defense gradually gave way to mobile operations aimed at regular Viet Cong combat formations. With regard to staffing, Richardson said that both he and MACV saw the provision of case officers as a critical issue. Noting that the skills of a fully trained clandestine operator were not required, he proposed assigning Army Counterintelligence Corps and military intelligence officers to serve as the CIDG camps' links with the station and with local GVN authorities.¹²

In the CIDG context, Richardson's new emphasis on support to military operations meant helping the Special Forces commander, Colonel George Morton, take over the administration of existing camps while expanding west toward the Cambodian and Laotian borders. GVN sensitivity to montagnard autonomy aspirations remained a principal station concern: "Any [montagnard] attitude other than full cooperation and loyalty . . . could be disastrous to [the] CIDG highlands program." Meanwhile, the Americans would have to "bend over backward" to recognize GVN authority even at the price of delays in arming and training new recruits.¹³

Colonel Morton, who had set up his headquarters in September at Nha Trang, on the coast in Central Vietnam, fully appreciated the political delicacy of CIDG expansion, but found himself immersed in the administrative and logistic complexities of Operation Switchback. In November, he wrote to the Switchback officer at CIA Headquarters lamenting the failures of understanding and of cooperation that typified the MACV command and staff echelons through which he reported. Morton had as yet no funding authorization, and no supplies were entering the pipeline. His problems were compounded, he said, by the low priority that MACV had assigned him for air and other support. Morton had nothing but praise for the station's support, "the only thing

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keeping Switchback going”; he added that if military support did not improve by spring, he would recommend leaving the programs with CIA.¹⁴

Morton’s headquarters correspondent responded with an apology for his inability to help. Asked to comment on the imbroglio, the station pointed out that it was continuing its funding and air transport support, but there was nothing it could do about the prolix military bureaucracy, with its overlapping command lines. The station saw Morton as trapped in a kind of catch-22 decision-making scheme in which every move required something else as a prerequisite, creating an endless spiral of frustration.¹⁵

Colonel Morton’s problems were compounded by accelerated CIDG expansion, by an increasingly starchy GVN posture, and by the first indications of CIDG vulnerability to Viet Cong infiltration. With no authority to disburse funds, and almost bereft of air transport, Morton found himself, on 1 February 1963, trying to manage a network of twenty-two operational camps and nine training centers. His Special Forces teams were well prepared to handle the military aspect of their assignment, but Morton, along with the station and some of his MACV superiors, saw a critical problem in the reduced CIA case officer presence.¹⁶

Morton and the station agreed that a case officer for a CIDG camp did not require all the skills of a clandestine operations officer. They also agreed that he did need enough political sensitivity and enough familiarity with Vietnamese issues and personalities to protect the integrity of the CIDG Mission while respecting the GVN’s sovereignty and the *amour propre* of its local representatives. Having stipulated all this, the station inexplicably recommended that the army turn to its own intelligence arms, both collection and counterintelligence, to find the required skills.¹⁷

The GVN, represented at the working level by Colonel Le Quang Tung, picked this time to become increasingly assertive. Although Ngo Dinh Nhu continued to permit CIDG expansion, Tung’s Special Forces in the CIDG camps showed little sympathy for the program or understanding of the montagnard psychology. More officious than effective at representing the GVN, Tung had already made it clear that his chief purpose was not to develop CIDG but to monitor the station and the U.S. Special Forces teams in the camps. Now, having been—perhaps coincidentally—promoted to full colonel, he was increasingly insistent on taking over operational direction while restricting the American role to logistic, financial, and training support.¹⁸

Tung objected to the presence of Americans when the CIDG Strike Forces were paid, and Layton had to remind him that this was the price of CIA flexibility: it was the only way the case officer could discharge his responsibility

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to guarantee the delivery of agency funds directly to the intended recipients. On 18 December 1962, Tung unilaterally limited to 300 the number of Strike Force personnel at any one camp, and Layton pointed out that this would prevent the exploitation of potential montagnard resistance to the communists. Probably also in December, Tung made another veiled complaint about U.S. preemption of command at CIDG camps. Layton rebuffed this with allusions to inadequate VNSF representatives and to VNSF failure to match the Americans' speed in responding to orders from Ngo Dinh Nhu sent through both VNSF and American channels.¹⁹

Another challenge to MACV management arose in late 1962 and early 1963, when the record of montagnard loyalty to the program, flawless for an entire year, suffered its first blemishes. In late December at Khe Sanh, in South Vietnam's northernmost province of Quang Tri, where the North Vietnamese later besieged U.S. Marine positions, the Viet Cong somehow abducted the entire village population, including CIDG defenders. With this episode still unexplained—the surviving record does not illuminate it—a VC Trojan horse operation disrupted a CIDG camp in Pleiku Province.

In this incident, the VC launched a night attack on Plei Mrong village, where some of the defenders, who had joined the militia at VC behest, turned their weapons on the CIDG Strike Force. One such “defender” entered the dispensary, firing an automatic rifle, and was killed by an American Special Forces soldier. A VC prisoner later described the operation to his U.S. interrogators, but the report of his debriefing does not explain whether the incident represented a case of widespread tribal disaffection or merely an isolated example of poor security. Layton maintained, in an exchange with Colonel Tung, that Vietnamese Special Forces and local GVN officials had at the very least failed to apply the recruiting criteria recommended by Combined Studies Division when it accepted hamlet defender trainees at Plei Mrong.²⁰

Despite these incidents, the station thought the Rhadé, at least, now “much closer to GVN partisanship” than at any previous time in its history. But it acknowledged that GVN fears of Rhadé separatism were not totally chimerical; it had already spotted and defused several such moves in this direction. To mollify the Vietnamese, Morton said, he would gradually disarm many of the Rhadé defenders in secure villages around Buon Enao.²¹

CIDG and the Cambodian Minority

Expansion into new tribal and ethnic groups posed still another challenge to Colonel Morton's exercise of the American side of CIDG management. Along

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with the construction of new camps in the highlands for such tribes as the Hré, Katu, and Bru, he was also charged with setting up the program in the western Mekong Delta. The presence there of a numerous Cambodian minority, a remnant of the early Khmer Empire, offered the prospect of inhibiting free VC access to the border area.²²

Carroll Ingram, one of Gil Layton's officers, visited the Chau Lang camp in An Giang Province in February 1963, where he found an atmosphere closely reminiscent of that of the Central Highlands. At least until the activation of the CIDG camp in October 1962, the ethnic Cambodian majority in the so-called Seven Mountains area had supported or tolerated the VC. Meanwhile, the attitude of local GVN authorities toward the Cambodians ranged from "apathetic at best to hostile at worst."²³

Ingram epitomized the agency's continual emphasis on political development by calling for programs whose purposes transcended both defense and economic-social development. To his mind, the basic objectives were to make the Vietnamese "realize their responsibilities vis a vis the Cambodians and . . . [to bring] the latter into active support of their government." A tall order, even had there been a full-time CIA presence, the prospects of meeting this political imperative faded to the vanishing point in a project under military management.²⁴

Nevertheless, Ingram saw essentially the same potential in the Cambodian minority that his colleagues had found among the montagnards. The medical program had already generated evident goodwill in the Cambodian population, while cordial cooperation marked the relationship between local GVN officials and the U.S. team. In addition, Ingram thought local American resources sufficient to facilitate economic development projects, including a sawmill, a rock quarry, and a water resources survey, to be followed by a storage and distribution system. To Ingram, integrated efforts by all the American entities in An Giang—these included a U.S. Navy team as well as the normal economic aid representation—created the prospect of helping An Giang become the first province fully under GVN control.²⁵

But the military style of command, which, at least at that period in Vietnam, emphasized discipline and compliance over imagination and initiative, nullified any such prospect. In April 1963, when Ingram visited again, four CIDG camps now served the Cambodian population. Ingram saw little to encourage him, and found especially incomprehensible the U.S. Special Forces' reluctance to train hamlet militia. In the highlands, Ingram noted, the militia formed the heart of the program, and the Strike Force served a support function. In An Giang, the CIDG advisers supported nothing but Strike Forces.

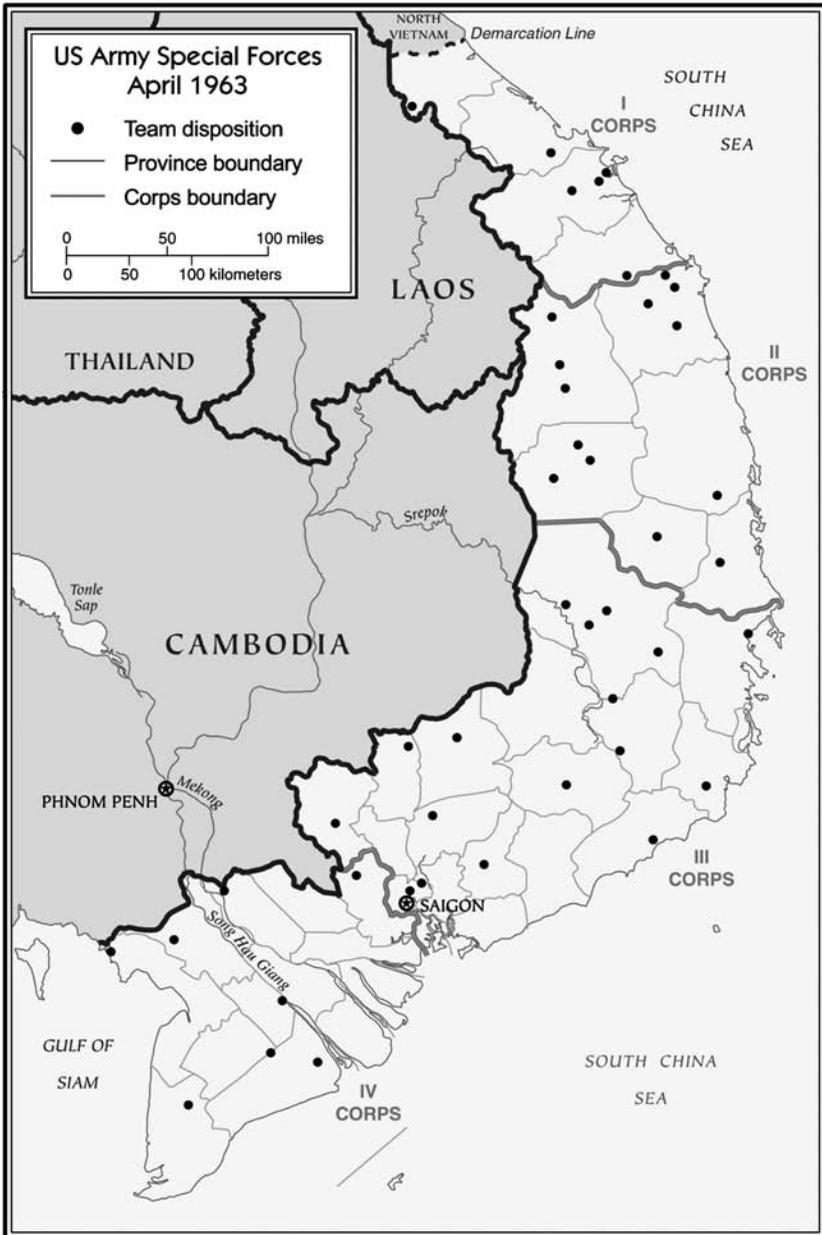
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Although the American “A” team leaders had good rapport with their VNSF partners and local GVN officials, they were hamstrung by the rigidity of their system.²⁶

Ingram noted that the complete absence of a political or psychological dimension accompanied the failure to build militia forces. There had been just two modest propaganda efforts, in the first of which the team leader at Hiep Hoa distributed USIS leaflets. He was “reprimanded by MACV for this show of initiative” and did not repeat it. At the Du Tho camp, a more imaginative Special Forces officer had procured a shadow box to show motion pictures during visits to outlying communities for sick call. He would show American westerns, known to be locally popular, interspersed with USIS propaganda films. He had spent \$125 out of pocket to install the gear on a truck, but MACV refused to reimburse him. The ensuing contretemps led to his removal from command. Ingram reacted harshly: “U.S. Special Forces fiscal and logistic policies reveal a complete and deplorable lack of imagination, stifle initiative, tend to demoralize the people in the field who are trying to do a job, and carry austerity to the point of absurdity.”²⁷

The An Giang program suffered from a more fundamental weakness than MACV’s rigidity. Despite cordial relationships with local authorities, no one was working on an area development program to expand the network of cooperating villages. One effect of this was a shortage of recruits into the Strike Forces, and Ingram saw “more forceful liaison work” with the GVN as required to rectify this. Like many other agency observers, Ingram believed that it was not CIA’s job to run a large, overt program. But he thought the U.S. Army failed to grasp the causes of the insurgency and therefore lacked any prescription for a cure. The answer, Ingram reported to Gil Layton, was a civilian-led task force “embracing the military, CIA, USOM, USIS, and the Embassy.”²⁸

Layton apparently did not recommend this approach to the COS. In any case, the U.S. Mission and the U.S. government were not yet ready for a formula that, as it happened, closely resembled the one promoted by Edward Lansdale in 1955. But the need remained. Whatever the native abilities, energy, and goodwill of the Special Forces team leaders, their short tours of duty—only six months—prevented them from mastering the tricky relationship between the Vietnamese and the various minorities enrolled in CIDG. Layton’s policy, during CSD’s custody of the program, had required “A” team leaders to advise him of conflict or controversy with local contacts, and then to sit tight until a CIA case officer arrived to help. MACV saw merit in this approach, and COS Richardson agreed to continue it. But despite command-level support, U.S.



U.S. Army Special Forces supporting CIA counterinsurgency programs, April 1963.

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Army officers in the field resented and subverted it. By mid-1963, this role had become so burdensome and unproductive that Layton appealed to Richardson to relieve him of it. The COS declined to do so, but in practice the participation of his Combined Studies Division continued to fade.²⁹

The endemic rigidity of army management did not reflect any policy-level disagreement with the agency over the purposes or practices of CIDG. As we have seen, General Harkins, however oblivious of the political aspects of the lowland insurgency, actively supported the CIA approach to the montagnards. When Colonel George Morton arrived in the fall of 1962 to prepare to head the program after Switchback, he impressed the station with his grasp of what was needed to make CIDG succeed. And there were officers at the Pentagon equally comprehending of the nature of the program and of the techniques required to carry it out. These included, most notably, then-Colonel William DePuy, heading the army's Special Warfare Directorate, and Major General William B. Rosson, special assistant for Unconventional Warfare to the army chief of staff.³⁰

Rosson accepted both the concept of defending an expanding territorial base and the necessity to build montagnard loyalty to the GVN. More explicitly than is to be found in agency correspondence, he called on the program to engender mutual confidence between the GVN and the tribes. U.S. Special Forces must not, he said, allow the montagnards to transfer their loyalty to the Americans. Indeed, the Americans must actively promote the participation of local GVN officials. Rosson seemed to believe that agency management had adequately served these purposes; after a visit to Vietnam in January 1963, he told an assembly of U.S. military officers—"apparently to [their] amazement," according to an agency officer present—that CIDG offered the best prospect for victory over the insurgency.³¹

Rosson had less praise for MACV, saying that it been delinquent in helping Colonel Morton prepare for Operation Switchback. Rosson had pointed out to MACV the lack of air transport for Switchback, as station air support was withdrawn, but had been able to get no more from General Harkins than a promise to "do his best" to provide more from MACV resources. And he acknowledged his embarrassment that the army had not yet released the \$7.7 million allotment called for under the summer 1962 agreement with CIA Headquarters.³²

Like agency observers, General Rosson noted the apathy of the Vietnamese Special Forces contingents in the camps. He went further than station reporting when he identified a long-term problem confronting Colonel Morton that the program under agency management had only begun to experience. This

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involved the assimilation of secured CIDG villages into Ngo Dinh Nhu's Strategic Hamlet program, as agreed upon by Nhu and COS Richardson. Thirty-one villages around Buon Enao were already in the process of being transferred, and Rosson noted that plans called for reducing the Strike Forces, recalling some weaponry, and having the GVN's Darlac officials assume the burden of services to the Rhadé villagers. At the time of Rosson's visit, the GVN was unprepared, and the villagers were "not psychologically attuned to the new arrangement." If the entire program was to revert to the GVN within three years, which Rosson understood to be the plan, a great deal remained to be done.³³

Military Management

In these circumstances, on 1 February 1963, command of the CIDG camps passed from the CIA Station to MACV and Colonel Morton; the agency was to retain responsibility for funding and logistics until 1 July. Unfortunately for Rosson and Morton, their nuanced considerations about the politics and psychology of counterinsurgency got less attention from senior commanders such as Admiral Felt, in Honolulu, and army chief of staff General Earle Wheeler, than did the formal question of an unequivocal line of military authority. As Rosson worried about relationships among montagnards, U.S. Special Forces, and the GVN, a Wheeler report on Vietnam complained that some CIA assets were being exempted from Operation Switchback on grounds that appeared, in Wheeler's words, to "contravene the basic concept of establishing the entire project under the military, except for elements wholly involved in secret intelligence."³⁴

The State Department shared General Rosson's concerns, and doubted that Special Forces officers, assigned for only six months, could handle the delicate political equities. On 6 February, with Switchback already an accomplished fact, Assistant Secretary of State Averell Harriman bearded Bill Colby—powerless to do anything about the matter—and insisted that Special Forces officers replacing CIA case officers should serve at least one and preferably two years. Undersecretary of State U. Alexis Johnson expanded on the political theme at a meeting the next day, praising the station's CIDG management and questioning whether the army possessed the "proper political finesse." Marine Major General Victor Krulak, representing the Joint Chiefs of Staff on unconventional warfare matters, assured him that the army understood the problem and was working on it.³⁵

Just how the army was addressing the problem, Krulak apparently did not say, but Colby thought that, so far as CIA was concerned, the point was

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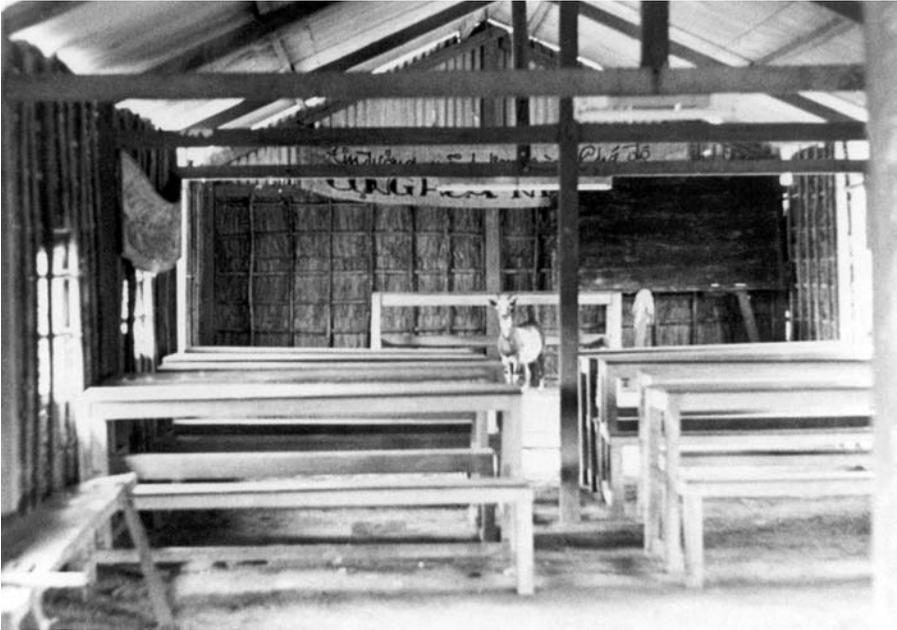
U.S. Special Forces team quarters at the Khe Sanh CIDG camp, Quang Tri Province, c. 1963.

already moot. In a memorandum of 14 February, he presented the alternatives to the acting DCI: cancel Operation Switchback, restore an active role for CIA in handling the political aspects, or proceed on the existing course toward unconditional turnover. Reversion to CIA management was out of the question, so far as Colby was concerned, and formal responsibility for political liaison would require a level of access to the camps that effectively assigned the station a policing role. He recommended that Operation Switchback continue, with the station providing the benefit of its political expertise only as requested. A month later, the DCI agreed.³⁶

In April, Colonel Morton tried to take advantage of Colby's offer, making a formal request for continued station political briefings for his "A" teams. But Colby, and probably Morton as well, were aware by this time of the pro forma flavor of this arrangement. The station had reported in February, in the context of expanding CIDG into the Mekong Delta, that it had no plans to furnish regular guidance to the teams being deployed there: "Frankly, attempts to do so have met with some resistance. Indications are that [the] Special Forces feel they can go it better alone and our presence [is] not wholly desirable." Nevertheless, the station would stand by to assist upon request.³⁷

Headquarters interpreted this as implying serious friction, and Acting COS David Smith tried to put the matter in perspective: USSF commanders were understandably impatient to exercise their command prerogative, and they sometimes failed to understand a case officer's continuing accountabil-

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CIDG classroom at Khe Sanh, c. 1963. Original photo has caption “Instructor standing up front.”

ity for funds and supplies. Case officers, on the other hand, accustomed to operational control of Special Forces teams and still eager to see the program succeed, might be making more suggestions than the new team leaders found congenial.³⁸

Shortly after assuming full responsibility for liaison with Colonel Tung’s Vietnamese Special Forces, Colonel Morton withdrew his liaison element from Saigon, concentrating the entire CIDG management element in Nha Trang in Central Vietnam. In early April, John Richardson questioned the wisdom of separating the American and Vietnamese CIDG commands. Harkins dismissed this concern; he wanted as many units as possible located outside Saigon, and his J-3 (operations) staff would take care of the Tung liaison on Morton’s behalf. Harkins insisted that he had no reservations of any kind about the activities of his Special Forces contingent. He listened attentively, but without comment, to Richardson’s statement of “preliminary indications” of trouble in Special Forces’ coordination with GVN authorities in the provinces.³⁹

Richardson did not explicitly address the continuing confusion of MACV

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CIDG Strike Force barracks at Khe Sanh, c. 1963.

command authority over Colonel Morton, or Morton's stated intention to insist on reporting to General Richard Stilwell, chief of the Army Support Group, despite a MACV regulation subordinating him to the MACV J-3, General Kelleher. The COS did point out the unwieldy size and complexity of the new Special Forces command structure. What Combined Studies had done with no more than twenty people in both Saigon and the camps, and without intermediate supervisory echelons, now required a "C-team" command element of seventy-six officers and men at Nha Trang and a "B-team" at each corps headquarters. Harkins responded that this represented in fact a very modest superstructure; were it not for Admiral Felt's insistence on austerity, the Nha Trang headquarters would have some two hundred people.⁴⁰

The "preliminary indications" of trouble so delicately alluded to by Richardson included evidence of a serious breakdown of communication between CIDG camps and local GVN authorities. Recognizing the VNSF camp commanders' reluctance to coordinate their programs with province and district chiefs, Morton had directed the intermediate U.S. Special Forces echelon—the "B" team stationed with each ARVN Corps Headquarters—to take over this

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function in cases of VNSF nonfeasance. But the “B” teams themselves, in the station’s carefully phrased opinion, were “sometimes less appreciative of [the “A” teams’ political problems] than they might be.” As a result, it took the combined efforts of a CIA case officer and the local USOM representative to reestablish a working relationship between CIDG and provincial and district authorities in Quang Tin Province. In a similar episode, the Quang Nam province chief complained to the station that the U.S. Special Forces team at An Diem did not understand that consolidating tribal loyalty to the GVN was supposed to take precedence over military action against the Viet Cong.⁴¹

There were similar problems at Khe Sanh, northernmost Quang Tri Province, exacerbated in this case by the duplicity of the district chief and “overzealousness” in the ARVN First Division’s dealings with the Bru tribe. But liaison at Khe Sanh was weak, reflecting the political naiveté, passivity, and excessive emphasis on military operations that now characterized U.S. Special Forces performance in I Corps as a whole. The weakness of local liaison relationships was compounded, in the station’s view, by the fact that some problems could be solved only at a higher level than Colonel Tung’s. The station could have arranged for discussion of such issues at the cabinet level or with Ngo Dinh Nhu, but, fearing to create the appearance of gratuitous interference, confined itself to assurances of readiness to help.⁴²

Problems of liaison with other GVN jurisdictions were compounded by friction between U.S. and Vietnamese Special Forces over what the Vietnamese saw as abrogation of American commitments. One of these, regarding the retroactive cancellation of pay to 153 of Tung’s cadremen in I Corps, brought a VNSF man to the station’s Da Nang Regional Office to complain. The CIA chief there feared that such incidents—another occurred with the termination of support to Catholic Youth hamlet defenders in Quang Nam and Quang Tin—“would gravely impair the Special Forces” effectiveness and “could conceivably put them out of business entirely.”⁴³

Switchback and the Rhadé

It was for the first CIDG effort, the arming of the Rhadé, that the ground had been most thoroughly prepared, and the implementation of Switchback there constituted the acid test of the entire exercise. A station officer visited Buon Enao in late April 1963 and found that GVN eagerness to supplant the Americans had resulted in a destructively hasty reorganization. Strike Forces had been transferred into Civil Guard or border surveillance units, and Buon Enao villages had been summarily placed under provincial control. These changes

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might have succeeded, had they been adroitly handled. The Buon Enao VNSF camp commander and his former station case officer had, for example, proposed to disseminate word of the new pay scales and command arrangements through a properly briefed tribal leadership. But VNSF and Darlac officials ignored this advice. They had also, according to the camp commander, replaced Rhadé Strike Force leaders with “haughty, cocky Vietnamese, who ‘intend to ride hard on the Rhadé.’” An American sergeant serving his second tour with the tribesmen said he could no longer look the Rhadé in the face; he felt that their American patrons had “stabbed them in the back.”⁴⁴

An anguished letter from Rhadé leaders to their original CIA contact testified to their distress, partly at GVN hostility to them and the program, and partly at the reduction of the material benefits previously accorded by the Americans. Eight hundred Strike Force troops had been disarmed, after what they understood to be American promises of permanent custody of their weapons, and pay had been reduced for both Strike Force and hamlet militia personnel. The local USSF detachment had, of course, authored none of these developments. On the other hand, while it might have been unable to prevent or ameliorate any of them, it had also apparently not tried to.⁴⁵

CIDG in Decay

On 10 May 1963, the Saigon Station met a headquarters requirement for an evaluation of Operation Switchback. The assessment praised the quality of military training in the camps, but noted the shortage of trainees and the disappearance of the program’s nonmilitary aspects. The station was inclined to attribute the scarcity of new CIDG recruits to the deterioration of relationships with local authorities that followed the replacement of experienced “A” teams in the first months after Switchback. The shortfall might also, the station acknowledged, reflect recently expressed GVN unhappiness with the numbers of U.S. personnel active at provincial level and below. In any case, Strike Force training and construction of secure camps as bases for offensive patrols seemed to constitute the entire USSF program. The station recognized these efforts, but deplored the accompanying inattention to winning the villagers’ participation in a program of defending an expanding territorial base.⁴⁶

The quality of U.S. Special Forces personnel had been a major contributor to the early success of CIDG, and the station’s evaluation gave credit where it was due. The officers and NCOs who served with the program during its first year were all career Special Forces people, “‘three-time volunteers,’ highly trained and motivated and dedicated to their mission.” But forced-draft expan-

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sion of this elite unit by the Kennedy administration had brought replacements who matched their predecessors in neither training nor motivation. At least one station officer believed that this accounted for many of the local failures that accompanied Operation Switchback.⁴⁷

On occasion, Combined Studies Division intervened to fend off what it saw as threats to the program's survival. At one point during the transition process, a Viet Cong assault killed 37 Bahnar tribesmen at their CIDG base camp in Kontum Province. The VC lost close to 100 men before being beaten off, but in addition to the Bahnar casualties, camp facilities had suffered major damage. Gil Layton flew up to see if he could help, and found a MACV major already conducting an investigation. To Layton, it looked like an effort to fix blame for the CIDG losses. Hoping to preserve Bahnar confidence in the reliability of U.S. support, he countermanded this mission on the spot, directing the major to organize the rebuilding of the dispensary and other camp facilities.⁴⁸

The CIA's responsibility to furnish money and supplies for Switchback activities was to have ended with the fiscal year, on 30 June 1963. The station wanted to shed its role as watchdog over Special Forces disbursements, and headquarters had felt constrained to remind it in March that all funds used for CIDG, whether originally appropriated for the CIA or the Defense Department budget, were being spent under CIA's "legislative special authority." Neither Saigon nor headquarters, therefore, could avoid a responsibility to review the Special Forces' CIDG disbursements. The discomfiture generated by this role was aggravated by the fact that the funds in question were still coming from agency appropriations. Legal and administrative obstacles—and probably working-level Pentagon reluctance as well—had nullified the McNamara guarantees of May 1962. As a result, the arrangement still in effect in Laos, where the agency administered Defense Department funds, was reversed in Vietnam.

The funding imbroglio did not reverse the trend toward further agency disengagement from paramilitary management. In one case, that of Father Hoa's Sea Swallows, the station obtained an advisory team for Binh Hung and funds from the Military Assistance program. But other activities continued to consume agency resources, even as their purposes became essentially military. The largest of these, the Mountain Scouts, remained an agency logistic responsibility until its demise in November 1963, when most of its personnel were assimilated into CIDG.⁴⁹

In addition to its activities in the field of village defense and rural political action, the station had since 1961 conducted an intelligence program, also in liaison with Colonel Tung, designed to surveil South Vietnam's highland borders with Laos and Cambodia. As Operation Switchback proceeded, this

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mission drew progressively more attention, not only from Special Forces and MACV but from the chief of station.⁵⁰

As it happened, the Border Surveillance program served to introduce me to the complexities of counterinsurgency in Vietnam. Fresh from a tour in the upper panhandle in Laos, where I had created and run a paramilitary program, I was now charged with supervising CIDG Strike Force reconnaissance operations from the other side of the border, in Quang Tri and Thua Thien provinces. Whereas in Laos my irregulars were faced with uniformed—if officially unacknowledged—North Vietnamese, I now confronted a more shadowy enemy. Indeed, the unspoken assumption that drove the Border Surveillance program was that covert infiltrators from the North constituted the core of insurgent strength.

I cannot recall that my Special Forces–led patrols reported any sightings or engagements during my seven months with the program. This would have constituted some basis for questioning the scale of Hanoi’s intervention, but I had not yet begun to doubt the conventional wisdom. I was therefore not surprised when I learned that, at a meeting with MACV on 30 July 1963, John Richardson had made explicit the end of any Mountain Scout responsibility for political work in the villages. Urging MACV to accept a greater share of this border mission, he said he wanted nevertheless to keep some of the best of the Mountain Scout units operating in the interior for station operations along and across the border. The COS thought these elements could be employed as a “mobile reserve . . . simply picked up from provinces and moved as mercenaries” wherever they were needed. This might have served a useful purpose, except for the reluctance of the affected irregulars to cooperate. At the same meeting, the station officer working in II Corps noted that an effort to deploy them in this way had already led to Mountain Scout desertions in Kontum Province.⁵¹

MACV and the U.S. Special Forces adopted a similar approach to CIDG, with similar results. Colby later reported to the DCI on the new emphasis, approved by Secretary McNamara, on “aggressive guerrilla patrols,” sometimes after deployment far from the tribesmen’s villages. This guidance overlooked the limited motivation of the montagnard irregulars, whose recruitment had been predicated on a community defense mission. MACV’s effort to turn the montagnard volunteers into an offensive force, emphasizing long-range reconnaissance and combat patrols, provoked a sharp decline in their numbers. Montagnard participation fell by half within six months of MACV’s assumption of CIDG management, from 38,000 in January 1963 to about 19,000 a year later.⁵²

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Attention to signs of CIDG decay was distracted, less than three months after the program's transfer to MACV, by the outbreak of the Buddhist-led unrest that signaled the intensity of popular alienation from the Diem government. The urban disorder that preoccupied both the GVN and the United States did not affect the Switchback schedule, and MACV took over support of the last program, the Mountain Scouts, on 1 November 1963, the day on which dissident generals overthrew President Ngo Dinh Diem.⁵³

Experiments in the Lowlands

The self-immolations of Buddhist monks that dramatized religious unrest in the summer of 1963, and Diem's inability either to mollify or to suppress the dissidents, paralyzed the South Vietnamese government and its campaign against the insurgency. In August, the GVN deployed Colonel Tung's Special Forces in raids on urban Buddhist pagodas, and the station became embroiled in the question of Diem's improper use of American-supplied resources to quell the wave of riots. The Kennedy administration soon came to despair of reinvigorating the war effort while Diem remained in power, and encouraged Major General Duong Van Minh and dissident colleagues to remove him. After much backing and filling, the plotters made their move on 1 November, ignoring earlier U.S. appeals to spare the lives of Diem and Nhu.¹

In the aftermath of the coup, U.S. officials began to discover how their reliance on GVN reporting had distorted U.S. perceptions of the scale of the insurgency and prevented the Kennedy administration from recognizing the failure of the Strategic Hamlet program. A December visit to Vietnam by Defense Secretary McNamara and other officials, including DCI McCone, found both the Vietnamese generals and the U.S. Mission in a state of helpless disarray. McCone judged that, six weeks after the coup, there was still "no organized government in South Vietnam." McNamara harshly criticized the U.S. Country Team and what he called Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge's total lack of leadership, and deplored the poor communication between Lodge and General Harkins. The general, for his part, seemed to believe that there was nothing wrong in the countryside that the commitment of more troops would not cure. But McNamara concluded in his report to President Johnson that unless current trends were reversed within ninety days, the country would go neutralist or communist.²

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In the narrower context of intelligence, both McCone and McNamara acknowledged the failures of Defense and CIA reporting that had permitted groundless optimism about the Strategic Hamlet program. Blaming CIA and overall U.S. government reliance on GVN statistics for these failures, McCone called for intelligence “nets of our own,” if necessary, to assure better information.³

A more fundamental question was the composition and policy direction of the new government. The dissident generals had made it plain that they understood their own limitations as political leaders, and the station was eager to help them get off on the right foot, especially in the matter of reinvigorating the battle against the Viet Cong. But Ambassador Lodge, anxious both to limit the agency role and to avoid the appearance of U.S. manipulation of the junta, declared a moratorium on official U.S. contacts with the new regime that lasted until January 1964. Even then, when he finally agreed to let the station honor Vietnamese requests for consultation, he restricted the agenda in a way that effectively precluded examining the problems and possible opportunities of a new military government.⁴

In this policy vacuum, the mercurial Lodge returned to the notion of the insurgency as an exclusively North Vietnamese creation. On 20 February, he wired the president that “various pressures can and should be applied to North Vietnam to cause them to cease and desist from their murderous intrusion into South Vietnam.” The North Vietnamese were indeed assiduously supporting their Southern communist compatriots, exploiting the vacuum created by GVN passivity and American policy confusion. By the end of 1963, according to the North Vietnamese Army’s history of the war, the insurgents had reasserted control over all the land and people lost to the counterinsurgency programs launched by the GVN after the VC Tet campaign of January 1960.⁵

This was not literally true, of course, as the programs initiated by CIA, and presumably at least those Strategic Hamlets inhabited by self-motivated minorities like the Catholics, were still intact. And McNamara’s prediction of a Saigon collapse within ninety days turned out to be overdrawn. Furthermore, despite Buddhist suspicion of the Catholics in Minh’s new junta, religious dissent receded in the wake of the coup. But the fractious military government entirely failed to exploit the general euphoria that followed the demise of the Diem regime, and the GVN position in the countryside continued to decay.⁶

More Improvisation

In the wake of Operation Switchback and the end of the Diem regime, the CIA Station in Saigon found itself without a major role in counterinsurgency

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planning and management. In one respect, this is just what it had sought, as Switchback brought relief from the staffing and logistic burdens of massive paramilitary operations. But the agency's experience in Vietnam combined with its institutional self-image to make it welcome the new Johnson administration's expectations of a substantial CIA contribution to the next phase of the effort. Indeed, throughout the course of Operation Switchback, the station had been actively looking for new ways to preserve CIA involvement.

The principal burden of this exploratory effort had fallen on Stuart Methven, the gregarious case officer whose service with the Mountain Scouts made him perhaps the best traveled and most widely connected agency operative in Vietnam. In late 1962, John Richardson had called him down from the highlands to advise him of plans to add the Mountain Scouts to the Switchback agenda. Methven strenuously objected, predicting that the inevitable militarization of the program would destroy it, but Richardson dismissed his argument as emotional overreaction. In any case, the die was already cast, and as Combined Studies Division prepared to take over the Mountain Scouts, Methven turned his focus to the south. There, over the next year, he developed new contacts and local programs that shaped the pacification agenda after the fall of the Diem government.⁷

Methven began in Long Khanh, a province whose approachable chief governed a mixed population of lowlanders and montagnards, and whose proximity to Saigon made agency programs relatively easy to monitor. Methven had installed the Mountain Scout program there, and he now continued that approach on a smaller scale. An armed team of five or six men could penetrate VC-influenced areas, he thought, without tempting MACV to look at it as just another combat resource to be absorbed into the military command structure. The team's purposes continued to include protecting villagers from Viet Cong encroachments, for the case officer shared the common perception of the VC as an alien presence, essentially devoid of spontaneous support in the villages. But he wanted the new, smaller program also to pursue the original Mountain Scout objective, asserting a benevolent presence in areas where the regular GVN apparatus was absent or ineffective.⁸

Methven had no illusions about the potential of such a modest program or about the extent of Viet Cong inroads in a province whose capital, Xuan Loc, lay barely fifty miles from Saigon. Even before Buddhist unrest distracted GVN attention from the Strategic Hamlet program in mid-1963, he saw the province as largely under enemy control, and the teams he supported could circulate no farther than into the hamlets adjacent to the district towns.⁹

One indication of VC dominance was the evident *modus vivendi* between the communists and the managers of the French-owned rubber plantations in

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Long Khanh. The communists and the French conducted a charade in which plantation officials were ostensibly kidnapped by the Viet Cong. The ransom paid for their release substituted for the taxes that, if paid to the VC, might have provoked GVN sanctions against the French management. But the same managers who paid off the VC were sometimes willing to share information on them from their own sources. Methven cultivated the manager of the plantation nearest Xuan Loc, and landed there one day for an informal briefing. The Frenchman carried a flask of cognac and offered Methven a swig even as he urged him to take off posthaste to avoid a party of armed Viet Cong headed their way. And in fact Methven's small plane, an Air America helio-courier, was fired on as it left the ground.¹⁰

Under even greater communist pressure was an area north of Saigon that the GVN called the Phuoc-Binh-Thanh Special Zone, which included the communist redoubt known as War Zone D. President Diem had installed as Special Zone commander an exceptionally able ARVN officer, Lieutenant Colonel Do Van Dien, who devoted his remarkable energies as much to winning civilian loyalty as to running effective military operations. Together, Methven and Dien worked out a variation on the formula employed with the Mountain Scouts and the new, smaller effort in Long Khanh.¹¹

First applied in March 1963, the formula included small political action teams, modeled on the Scouts, to be deployed in VC-influenced villages on the edge of War Zone D. Dien and Methven added what they called "special teams" aimed at penetrating the zone itself, presumably for intelligence and harassment purposes. President Diem, visiting Colonel Dien on 27 March, endorsed the program in a chat with Methven, who then encouraged the colonel to expand it to surround Zone D. By so doing, Methven believed, the government could restrict the communists' freedom of maneuver and make them vulnerable to ARVN attack.¹²

As always, the station was concerned to improve not only the GVN's physical security but also the psychological and political climate in the countryside. Colonel Dien shared this approach, and he and Methven wanted to set up a political action and indoctrination center at a corner of War Zone D. Dien exploited every potential ally in his effort to isolate this communist base, building schools in surrounding villages, promoting civic action, and even arming a defense force in a Catholic convent and some of the patients in a leper colony. The VC reacted sharply, targeting especially Dien's district chiefs, who were usually company-grade ARVN officers. Methven drove with Dien to the site of a raid on one GVN district headquarters, where they found the decapitated body of the district chief, his head tossed into a toilet bowl.¹³

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While Colonel Dien struggled to mount serious opposition to communist dominance in War Zone D, Methven began another program, aimed at the area southeast of the capital. This evolved from his acquaintance with a Catholic businessman named Nguyen Van Buu. A Diem loyalist, Buu ran a variety of enterprises whose activities and employees he wanted to protect from the communists. He and the case officer decided to emphasize ideological indoctrination and training in civic action for the leaders of irregular military units known, according to their members' roles in Buu's business enterprises, as the "shrimp soldiers" and the "cinnamon soldiers." In a tripartite arrangement, the weapons and training came from CIA, salaries from Buu, and the training site, at Cat Lo on the South China Sea near Vung Tau, from ARVN colonel and future president Nguyen Van Thieu.¹⁴

The first forty politically indoctrinated unit leaders emerged from Cat Lo in 1963, probably during the spring of that year. As was always true of CIA counterinsurgency efforts in Vietnam, the case officers who asserted the indispensability of political training found themselves unable to supply its content. At Cat Lo, this void was filled by ARVN captain Le Xuan Mai who, despite his adherence to an independent nationalist party, the Dai Viet, had originally been detailed by the Diem regime to help train Mountain Scouts. Before Diem's overthrow, Cat Lo trained the leadership for some 500 "shrimp soldiers" and an unknown number of "cinnamon soldiers"; together, they constituted a small private army that bore the brunt of securing the road from Saigon to the port and military facilities at Vung Tau.¹⁵

These efforts were supplemented, during the course of 1963, by those of case officers working in a scattering of other provinces. The result was a farago of ad hoc security and psychological warfare gambits, including traveling drama teams, a loudspeaker campaign to publicize the VC murder of a village girl near Zone D, and a get-out-the vote campaign for National Assembly candidates in Bien Hoa Province, just north of Saigon. As of October 1963, even as tension between the United States and the Diem regime approached a climax, the station was active in seventeen of a projected twenty provinces. Some of these represented new activity in provinces originally served by CIDG or Mountain Scouts; there were twenty propaganda teams in Darlac, for example, and others in Kontum and Pleiku.¹⁶

Similar efforts began in other highlands provinces, some of them sponsored on the Vietnamese side by the same Hue Special Projects Section, reporting to Ngo Dinh Can, that ran the Force Populaire. Growing evidence of mismanagement and corruption in Hue, especially after Can's men there took over the distribution of agency funds to the provinces, led the station to renew its contacts

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at the local level. Can and his retainers displayed less sensitivity to working-level liaison in this case than they had with Force Populaire, and management through province chiefs was restored. This arrangement already prevailed in the south, where Interior Minister Bui Van Long had endorsed the station's direct assistance to province chiefs and at least tacitly approved the efforts even with private citizens like businessman Nguyen Van Buu.¹⁷

Tran Ngoc Chau and the Kien Hoa Paradigm

It was during this period of searching for new GVN partners and counterinsurgency techniques that CIA became acquainted with the Vietnamese official who did the most to shape both the agency activity that replaced the Switch-back programs and the national pacification programs that emerged in 1966 and 1967. Tran Ngoc Chau, then an ARVN major, had recently become chief of Kien Hoa Province in the Mekong Delta when, in late 1962, USOM Rural Affairs Director Rufus Phillips brought Stuart Methven to meet him.¹⁸

Chau's approach to the insurgency resembled that of the agency in its insistence on the need to win the active participation of the peasantry, and in its recognition that the traditional style of Vietnamese governance would never achieve this. This mentality made him a rarity among ARVN officers. Moreover, in his determination to articulate a comprehensive strategy, with unremitting attention to the details of execution, Chau was perhaps unique. He was also egocentric and a poor judge of people, and because of the latter trait sometimes ill served by his subordinates. But for three years, interrupted only by his service as mayor of Da Nang during the 1963 Buddhist crisis, Chau and his agency colleagues used Kien Hoa Province as the incubator for all but one of the programs that became the core of the national pacification scheme.¹⁹

Chau's experience before his assignment to Kien Hoa had included six years with the Viet Minh, combat against the French as a Viet Minh officer, a later commitment to a free and anticommunist South Vietnam, and duty as an ARVN officer with the territorial forces responsible for rural security. Chau's analytic bent and independence of mind—the latter stiffened, perhaps, by a touch of mandarin pride—combined with his service to both parties to the struggle, make his story unusually instructive. His experience helps illuminate not only the evolution of his counterinsurgency programs but the political and economic issues he tried to engage.

Chau was born in 1924 into an aristocratic Buddhist family in Hue, where his grandfather had served as a minister in the imperial cabinet. Reaching young manhood during the Japanese occupation of French Indochina, Chau joined

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the clandestine National Salvation Youth Organization in 1943 and served as an intelligence courier for partisans opposing both the Japanese and the Vichy French regime. He joined the Viet Minh after it absorbed the National Salvation Youth in 1944 and quickly rose through the ranks, becoming successively company commander and deputy battalion commander in the war against the French.²⁰

Communist Party members in the army were rare below regimental level, and although he was not himself a member, Chau served as an acting battalion political commissar. During this assignment, an old friend and recent party recruit urged him to join. Chau had already had ample opportunity to observe what he called the exemplary personal and professional comportment of the communist cadres; one of them, for example, had spoken of his decision to forsake a beautiful and deeply loved fiancée in order to serve the cause. Chau hesitated, not so much for ideological reasons (communist proselyting emphasized social justice and anticolonialism rather than Marxism) as from doubt of his ability to make the required total commitment. In addition, like many other middle- and upper-class Vietnamese, he was favorably disposed toward the United States and Britain, both of which the Viet Minh identified with the French colonial enemy. This reinforced his reservations about a movement that he knew to be hostile to the traditions of his family and religion.²¹

Chau's temporizing spurred renewed efforts to indoctrinate him, but he now suspected that his long hesitation would make him a marginal figure even if he relented and joined the party. At this point, in early 1949, news of negotiations between Emperor Bao Dai and the French raised the possibility of an independent but also noncommunist Vietnam. These influences combined to dissipate Chau's allegiance to the Viet Minh, and he slipped away from his assignment to rally to the government in Quang Nam Province. At first reluctant to take up arms against former comrades, Chau changed his mind when the Elysée Agreements of March 1949 appeared to promise Vietnamese independence within the French Union. He became one of five ex-Viet Minh in the 120-man class at the opening of the Vietnamese Military Academy at Dalat in 1950.²²

The new lieutenant stayed at Dalat as an instructor after graduating in 1951. Then, after a brief staff assignment, he took command of an infantry company in a battalion attached to the French Expeditionary Corps (FEC). The highlight of this assignment was a mission to rescue an FEC unit trapped on the infamous Street without Joy, the favorite Viet Minh ambush site on the coast north of Da Nang. In this instance, the Viet Minh ambushed the relief column as well, but Chau's company found itself by chance in a defensible

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position in the bend of a river, and the Viet Minh eventually withdrew. Chau's last combat action took place at Hoi An, south of Da Nang, not long before the Geneva Accords were signed in July 1954. As the Viet Minh began to overrun his position, he called for artillery fire on it; better to die there, he thought, than face capture and be dealt with as a deserter. Again, the enemy withdrew and Chau again survived.²³

Postwar staff and command assignments included training at Fort Benning, Georgia, and two visits to Malaya to learn about the counterinsurgency techniques in use there. But Chau had no direct experience of the Diem government's campaign against the Viet Minh until early 1960, when the president named him inspector of Psychological and Political Warfare for the Civil Guard (CG) and the Self-Defense Corps (SDC). Diem had been impressed with a report on the kibbutz system that Chau drafted from the notes of his then-boss, a police general named Mai Huu Xuan, upon the latter's return from a tour of Israel. Xuan had apparently given credit where credit was due, and Diem recognized Chau's unusual potential as a competent, loyal administrator who was also a Buddhist.²⁴

Chau had already refused to join Ngo Dinh Nhu's Can Lao Party, but Diem chose to overlook this. And despite his antipathy for such Diemist innovations as the Can Lao, Chau greatly respected the president himself, admiring his intellect, patriotism, and personal integrity.²⁵

Chau's personal regard for the president made all the more startling and unsettling the conditions he witnessed on an introductory tour of the provinces in early 1960. He discovered that the 85 percent of the population living in the countryside and rural towns enjoyed fewer legal protections than city-dwellers, labored under a greater tax burden, and endured an inequitable system of agricultural land tenure. Chau observed that government organs—administrative, police, security, and paramilitary—from province to hamlet level were staffed with the same people who had served the French until 1954. A few ex-Viet Minh, like Chau himself, had won Diem's confidence, but as a rule the GVN apparatus, and especially the police and military security services, treated as suspected Viet Cong the large rural majority that had participated with the Viet Minh in the war against the French. This suspicion applied even to people who had done no more than to furnish occasional food, medical assistance, or refuge to what Chau called "active Viet Minh elements."²⁶

This pervasive suspicion and the repression that accompanied it seemed to Chau to be endorsed by the national leadership of the security organs, which itself had served the French. The security apparatus participated in the Anti-communist Denunciation Campaign, which humiliated former pro-Viet Minh opponents of the French and drove a gap between them and the GVN. Chau

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thought the population at large viewed the former servants of the French now serving Diem as the persecutors of those who had fought, or even sympathized, with the resistance.²⁷

Chau reported to Diem on these conditions, pointing out that the territorial forces—the CG and the SDC—were guilty of abuses, and that a mutual “feeling of mistrust” prevailed between them and the communities they were charged to protect. Diem responded by directing him to set up a school to instruct CG and SDC leaders in their responsibilities to the civilian population. But he gave Chau the impression that while he did not want the peasants abused, he looked on them more as subjects than as citizens; he governed more as a Confucian mandarin than as the elected head of a representative government. And the GVN as a whole, Chau began to think, was imitating the French by substituting anticommunism for a more positive and constructive nationalism. The Viet Minh–Viet Cong cadres, meanwhile, continued to ingratiate themselves in the countryside with the services and reforms in which Chau himself had participated during his years in the resistance. These included land reform, freely elected hamlet and village councils, literacy programs, and communal economic projects.²⁸

At the conclusion of the training program, Diem put Chau in command of all CG and SDC units in the northern tier of Mekong Delta provinces. Chau began by setting up a training center in Dinh Tuong Province at which he could indoctrinate the troops and their commanders and teach intelligence, psychological warfare, and civic action techniques as well as the principles of civil-military relations. The province chief, a Dalat classmate and friend, was a conventional military man and political innocent who once inquired why Chau concerned himself with technical civilian problems like land reform. But he indulged Chau’s request for a testing ground, turning over to him *de facto* control of the hamlets surrounding the training center.²⁹

As Chau watched his trainees at work in these hamlets, he noticed a vacuum both of intelligence on the Viet Cong and of any psychological campaign to persuade VC cadres to change sides. For intelligence, the local authorities relied on the same informant system used by the French, whose agents were usually known to their neighbors and therefore to the Viet Cong. They became the target of VC harassment or assassination schemes, or in order to survive allowed themselves to be doubled by the VC, and then reported on the GVN. As for psywar, the GVN was pursuing its “silent war” against former Viet Minh and their relatives and associates. Like the French, it relied on an exclusively repressive program of arrest, interrogation under abuse or even torture, and in some cases nonjudicial execution.³⁰

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Experimenting with the techniques he would soon apply in Kien Hoa Province, Chau emphasized protection of the villagers' property as well as persons, not solely from Viet Cong depredations but from abuses from any quarter, including GVN officials. In the key innovation, one that combined the lure of social services with the imperative for better intelligence, Chau launched what he called the Census-Grievance (C-G) program. Similar to the Complaints and Action program of former Philippine president Ramon Magsaysay, but drawn from Chau's personal experience, it involved a formal census, including periodic interviews with each householder, and a query about the respondent's concerns about social and economic conditions and about physical security. C-G workers would also elicit complaints about exactions by either local officials or the Viet Cong. Chau recalled that early results included the intimidation of VC activists who had until then felt secure enough to live at home. Now, fearing exposure, some of them took to the bush.³¹

Chau pursued the refinement of his training program through 1961. Then, one day in early 1962, a phone call summoned him to Gia Long Palace. President Diem instructed him to take over from Pham Ngoc Thao, later revealed to be an agent of Hanoi, as province chief in Kien Hoa, which adjoined Dinh Tuong on the south. Chau demurred, citing his lack of experience in civil administration, and asked to remain with the army. The Interior minister, also present, was aghast at this temerity, but Diem just ignored it, telling Chau to proceed at once to his new job.³²

Tran Ngoc Chau and CIA

Not long after arriving in Kien Hoa, Chau, now a lieutenant colonel, met Rufus Phillips, formerly of Lansdale's station. Having left CIA, Phillips was running the USOM Rural Affairs Section in Saigon. Chau's emphasis on winning civilian loyalties and on local initiatives to achieve that goal seemed to offer great promise, and Phillips wanted to help. But the centralized administration of USAID programs prevented the kind of ad hoc support that Chau's work needed. Phillips accordingly turned to Stuart Methven, who had just relinquished the Mountain Scout account and was working around War Zone D and in the area east of Saigon.³³

Having been introduced by Rufus Phillips, Methven and Chau explored tactics in talks often extending late into the night. Chau believed that GVN resources, including ARVN, should be devoted to the support of pacification, not to the pursuit of VC combat forces, and that a community should be regarded as pacified only when its inhabitants had been incorporated into

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a volunteer self-defense force capable of replacing the paid local defense units. Methven and Chau agreed that the prospects of developing this kind of self-reliance rested on the GVN's success in creating a competent, honest, benevolent local administration, one that systematically exploited its rapport with the citizenry for intelligence on the insurgency.³⁴

The formula they worked out combined Methven's mobile teams, now called Advance Political Action (APA) teams, and Chau's Census-Grievance program, which deployed resident workers in secure hamlets and placed mobile cadres with the APA teams in hamlets where the VC presented a physical threat. These programs thus became the point of confrontation with the VC political organization in Kien Hoa. Meanwhile, Chau used his provincial military forces, the Civil Guard, and the village militia, the SDC, for protection from communist military attack. He exploited U.S. economic aid to shore up the provincial government apparatus and to improve infrastructure wherever a sufficiently low level of communist violence permitted such improvements. These innovations were opposed not only by Viet Cong proselytizers but by his own district chiefs; within a few months, seven of eight of them applied for transfers. Word of this infuriated Diem, and he summoned Chau for a dressing-down. But after listening to Chau's explanation of their failure to support his program, he proposed court-martial for the seven. Chau recommended a more moderate course; in the end, four stayed and three left.³⁵

Kien Hoa Province had been a Viet Minh stronghold during the war of resistance to the French, after 1946, and became the scene of a savage conflict between the insurgents and colonial forces under French governor Jean Leroy. In 1954, when Diem came to power, he installed a set of GVN officials who shared the French attitude toward the anticolonial resistance. According to a station officer who visited Ben Tre in 1956, they embodied an extraordinary level of incompetence and venality. Security forces arrested people whose only offense was to have resisted the French under the Viet Minh banner; these indiscriminate arrests extended even to members of Ngo Dinh Nhu's proto-party, the National Revolutionary Movement. Denunciations of alleged communists reflected greed as well as ideological zeal, sometimes coming from former Viet Minh whose purpose was to lay claim to agricultural land for themselves or for landlords who bought their testimony.³⁶

When Chau's predecessor, Lieutenant Colonel Pham Ngoc, took over in 1960, he imported troops from the Hoa Hao sect in the southern Delta to deal with the VC, who were harassing not only outlying districts but even the provincial capital at Ben Tre. The Hoa Hao materially improved security along provincial lines of communication, but their abuses and those by resi-

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dent officialdom alienated even GVN adherents, and a woman named Nguyen Thi Dinh—later a senior official in the National Liberation Front—led a campaign of mass demonstrations and civil disobedience. Chau, observing all this from his training center in neighboring Dinh Tuong Province, attributed this endemic problem to the excessive authority of the deputy province chief, the ARVN officer who in his capacity as sector commander controlled provincial military forces. Concerned solely with the physical security of population centers and provincial installations, he would often employ draconian measures whose political wisdom the civilian province chief usually feared to question.³⁷

When Chau took over in Ben Tre, he discovered another source of disaffection. The French had granted tax relief to commercial and industrial enterprises launched under the auspices of Catholic parishes, and the GVN had never rescinded them. Well aware of Diem's partiality to his Catholic constituents, Chau was nevertheless astonished to discover that none of his Kien Hoa predecessors had even called this anomaly to the president's attention.³⁸

At the time of Methven's introduction to Major Chau, the new province chief had just dispensed with the services of the Hoa Hao, and the capacity of local security forces to keep the VC at bay had yet to be tested. In this climate, Methven found village chiefs somewhat wary about the ability of the APA teams to make a useful contribution to local security. Nevertheless, as with the Mountain Scouts, Methven's visits to the villages in which the teams were deployed persuaded him that the teams were making a material difference. Then, in the late spring of 1963, President Diem decided he needed a trusted Buddhist as his mayor in seething Da Nang, and Chau left Ben Tre to try to keep religious dissidence under control in South Vietnam's second largest city. During the nine months of his absence, the programs survived, although they did not prosper under his successor, a conventional military man who displayed little interest in the civilian aspects of counterinsurgency. As in the rest of South Vietnam, rural pacification took a back seat while the GVN struggled with urban Buddhist unrest.³⁹

A New Start

Chau remained in Da Nang during the first four months after the fall of Ngo Dinh Diem. During this period, the station confronted mutually aggravating problems—GVN instability, a heavy ambassadorial hand, and accelerating VC gains in the villages. Compounding the difficulty of energizing the new regime was the need to deal with the legacy of programs closely associated

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with Diem and his brothers Nhu and Can. It was to be expected that, whatever their potential, these activities would be renamed and reorganized, if not abolished outright. Ngo Dinh Can's Force Populaire disappeared overnight, and the new GVN suspended the Strategic Hamlet program. Support for the Fighting Fathers and the associated Combat Intelligence Teams and Combat Youth survived, while the cinnamon and shrimp soldiers of Diem loyalist Nguyen Van Buu were demobilized.⁴⁰

As for the montagnards, the new regime displayed even less sympathy for them than Diem had shown. The new commander of the Vietnamese Special Forces, Major General Le Van Nghiem, wrote to MACV that he wanted to "annihilate" CIDG. The Mountain Scouts could continue, but under VNSF command with continued support from Combined Studies Division. Major General Richard Stilwell, replying for MACV, urged the continuation of both activities, and the junta acquiesced, but their militarization proceeded apace.⁴¹

Bereft of any strategic vision or program initiatives of its own, Duong Van Minh's military junta had assented, just days after Diem's overthrow, to continued CIA counterinsurgency work at the provincial level. In late January 1964, a second coup removed the inert Minh, but his successor, General Nguyen Khanh, was also a longtime agency contact, and he accepted the provincial arrangement set up in November 1963. By this time, the sobering revelations of GVN weakness that followed Diem's fall had led the station to scale back its objectives. Rather than try to isolate VC War Zone D, for example, the station now proposed to deploy its various cadres into the nominally pacified Strategic Hamlets, where in many cases the GVN had yet to establish uncontested authority.⁴²

In the station, Cliff Strathern's Political Action Section, with Stuart Methven as its trailblazing field officer, acquired more people. There were perhaps a dozen in early 1964, all of them engaged once again in improvising propaganda gambits and supporting local initiatives. I was one of them, as Operation Switchback and the simultaneous demise of the Diem regime now offered me an opportunity to exchange the frustrations of border surveillance for those of counterinsurgency and nation-building in a country now run by a well-intentioned but clueless junta.⁴³

By March 1964, the Political Action Section was supporting not only Colonel Chau, newly returned to Kien Hoa, but a chaotic mixture of other programs. These were aimed variously at acquiring intelligence on the VC, motivating local leaders, including hamlet militia commanders, inducing VC members to desert, and providing civic action services. Some were so ill defined

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as to suggest that no one had thought through just how they were to work. One vague proposal called for cadres based in secure hamlets to recruit “semi-covert” operatives in VC territory who would collect intelligence until the time came for them to form “covert agit-prop cells,” the composition and mission of which were left to the reader’s imagination.⁴⁴

In the circumstances of early 1964, the station did not flatter itself that its programs, even if they fulfilled all expectations, could by themselves reverse the GVN’s decline: “If the broader military and economic programs for South Vietnam do not succeed or at least show signs of future success, political action activity will be ineffectual if not counterproductive.” From one point of view, this was perfectly obvious: even on a much larger scale than anyone proposed, the programs could not alone cope with the ubiquitous communist threat.⁴⁵

But the disclaimer left open the question whether military and economic progress could be expected without the help of the peasants. Successive agency operatives in Vietnam, from Lansdale through Colby and Mullen to Methven, had always insisted on a voluntary popular commitment as an essential ingredient, not a product, of successful counterinsurgency. The Mountain Scout and Force Populaire concepts, for example, had explicitly posited a benevolent GVN presence in the villages, winning spontaneous peasant cooperation, as the key to success against the Viet Cong.

Popular approval of Diem’s departure gave General Minh, and later General Khanh, an opportunity to add this political dimension to the security and military operations that had dominated counterinsurgency under the late president. But Minh did nothing to exploit either the public mood or his own personal popularity, and as early as January 1964 CIA Headquarters had concluded that without U.S. pressure he probably never would. Hoping to prod the GVN into action, headquarters proposed a “special American rural affairs team of ‘advisers.’” The bearers of this euphemistic title would in fact “have the final say in . . . implementing a new socio-politico-military program, in coordination with the Vietnamese and American military.” The working level would be composed of “young, energetic Vietnamese . . . who would be willing to work under competent American guidance to bring about a tangible simple social and economic reform program.”⁴⁶

Like many other such proposals, this one tended to mistake the desirable for the possible, and one of its cardinal points, redistribution of agricultural land, ignored the antipathy for land reform of the GVN and its propertied constituency. Headquarters recognized, however, that enthusiastic GVN participation was not to be expected, and that unless and until the program achieved substantial success, it would have to be “artificially stimulated by direct Ameri-

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can action.” In fact, the time was not yet ripe, even on the American side, for the integrated approach to pacification advocated in this proposal. Furthermore, it was now clear that the problem of “leverage,” that of influencing the Vietnamese without doing violence to their sensitivities or their sovereignty, had not disappeared with the demise of Ngo Dinh Diem.⁴⁷

The headquarters proposal ignored both sensitivities and sovereignty to a degree that suggests it was intended more to stimulate station thinking than to serve as a model for post-Diem counterinsurgency practice. In any case, the station and the U.S. Mission had at the national level no effective GVN counterpart with whom even to discuss the problems that headquarters was trying to address. Nguyen Ton Hoan, the nominal deputy prime minister for pacification, was a civilian Dai Viet politician whose GVN position reflected nothing more, it appears, than General Khanh’s accommodation of the American preference for at least the appearance of civilian participation in government. Hoan chronically complained to station officers about his lack of authority, and before the summer was over he gave up entirely and went into voluntary exile. Responsibility for the development of a comprehensive counterinsurgency effort continued to rest, in practice, with the Americans.⁴⁸

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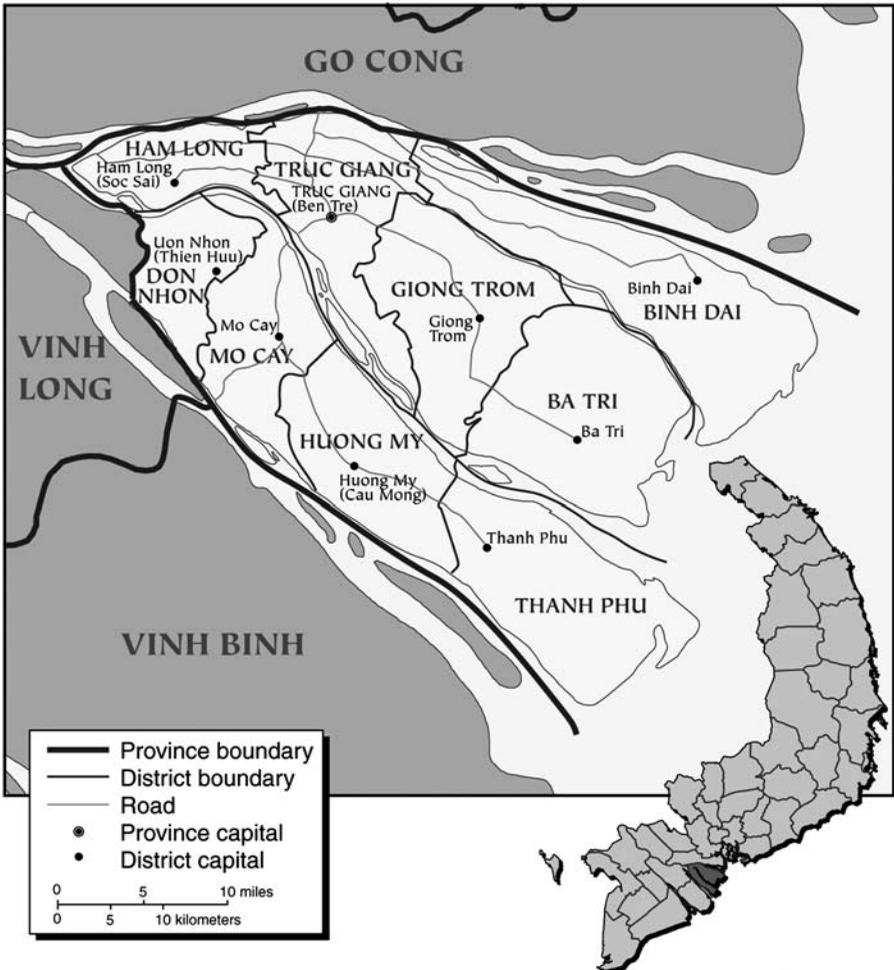
The absence of a national-level Vietnamese counterpart amplified the importance of local contacts as counterinsurgency partners. The most important of these was Lieutenant Colonel Tran Ngoc Chau, whose Buddhist affiliation had allowed him to escape crippling identification with the Diem regime. The station had kept in touch with him during his tenure as mayor of Da Nang, and when in early 1964 Nguyen Khanh's military government transferred him back to Ben Tre, he and Stuart Methven resumed their collaboration. By early spring, they had prepared to launch at the provincial level the kind of integrated program that the central government was not ready even to discuss.¹

It was at this point that Methven, whom the COS wanted to play a broader supervisory role, introduced me as the new Kien Hoa case officer. The first thing I learned was that, in sharp contrast to the areas protected by CIDG, this was an active combat zone. Chau did not claim to have defeated the insurgency during his earlier tenure in Kien Hoa, parts of which, as we have seen, had been fighting Saigon's control since the French reoccupation in 1946. Conditions had deteriorated since the spring of 1963, and he was starting from a position even less favorable than the one that greeted him in 1962. The Viet Cong were operating freely, except where GVN forces were concentrated, and I began my new assignment by accompanying Chau to the burial of his best district chief, killed the day before in a VC ambush. But communist gains during Chau's absence had no visible effect on his energy and confidence, and he welcomed me into a provincial team that already included exceptionally competent MACV and USOM advisers. Over the course of the next several weeks, in the collaborative atmosphere that Chau fostered, I resumed or began support to three programs.²

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Census-Grievance

As he had done during his first stint in Kien Hoa, Chau proceeded to make the Census-Grievance program the core of his pacification effort. His first operating principle reversed the GVN practice, adopted from the French, in which officials and military personnel were deployed away from their home areas



A Viet Minh bastion during the First Indochina War, Kien Hoa became the laboratory for most of the programs adopted by the Ministry of Revolutionary Development in 1967.



*On the routes of
communication -*



At the Stations



*At the dense
population -*

Page from briefing book, prepared by CIA-supported Vietnamese staff, Da Nang, 1967. Photos show Census-Grievance program "suggestion boxes" in Da Nang.

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in order to inhibit collusion with the resistance. Chau valued local residents' familiarity with prevailing conditions and problems, and he employed outsiders only when he was unable to find qualified local candidates. Recognizing that the program would stand or fall on a combination of integrity and competence, he personally selected and trained the first C-G workers, who were often schoolteachers or other literate people of similar social status.³

The French colonial regime had imbued its bureaucracy with servility rather than an internalized sense of professional responsibility, and Chau's staff, especially the people supplied by the ministries in Saigon, was no exception. To prevent sabotage of Census-Grievance at the local level, Chau bypassed his district chiefs and centralized the processing of both census information and the villagers' requests and complaints in a province-level office reporting directly to him. With respect to operational procedure, he trained his cadres to emphasize queries that demonstrated GVN concern for the peasants' welfare. As in the original program in Dinh Tuong Province, the interviewer would make a general inquiry about any threats to the respondent's security, and only after a positive response was he or she to solicit details of the problem, whether it was blamed on the Viet Cong or on the local GVN. As Chau recalled it, this technique developed enough confidence among the villagers being interviewed so that within a few months as many as half of them began to report VC activity or GVN malfeasance.⁴

Advance Political Action

Information from Census-Grievance interviews, presumably supplemented by such traditional sources as police and military intelligence, guided pacification activity in the province as a whole; it helped to determine, for example, the distribution of USOM and GVN material aid and technical services. C-G information also helped direct the other two CIA projects for which Kien Hoa became the primary testing ground. The first of these arose from the limited access of the C-G program. Unarmed C-G workers could function only in secured hamlets, which left Chau without a civilian presence in many of the numerous communities under Viet Cong influence. Accordingly, Chau and I revived the Advance Political Action concept—almost identical to the earlier Mountain Scout format—earlier proposed by Stuart Methven. Armed for self-defense, these teams were deployed in contested villages, trying to assert a GVN presence and establish its benevolent intentions.⁵

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Counter-Terror

Establishing the GVN's good intentions would not by itself win active peasant allegiance if the authority of the communist apparatus were not challenged. A program of precisely targeted attacks on VC safe havens and lines of communication had been under discussion for many weeks before the decision to launch such an effort in Kien Hoa. The evidence for the GVN's shrinking hold on the countryside was painfully obvious as we in the station traveled by helicopter between Saigon and the provinces. Every trip would reveal Strategic Hamlets that had eerily vanished from one day to the next, all the building materials having been removed and nothing remaining but bare earth to show where they had stood.⁶

Earlier station teams—Mountain Scouts and Combat Intelligence Teams, for example—had launched small raids or conducted minor ambushes in enemy-controlled territory. But as of early 1964, GVN efforts to disrupt the Viet Cong organization were limited to military sweep operations and harassing air and artillery bombardment. No concerted effort had yet been made to carry the war to the enemy by identifying individual targets—leadership or installations—and infiltrating his safe areas to capture, harass, or destroy.⁷

The most insistent calls for a reciprocal program of violence aimed at communist safe havens came from Australian Army officers, usually veterans of the Malayan campaign, who were working with the station on its pacification projects. Their urgings—and the sense of desperation that pervaded all of our efforts at the time—persuaded me to explore with Chau what came to be called the Counter-Terror (C-T) Team. We recognized that contesting with the Viet Cong in territory that they controlled would sometimes entail targeted action to capture or kill particular identified cadres. Accordingly, I solicited the approval of station management, which shared the conviction that desperate times called for uncompromising solutions.

Headquarters promptly approved, and Chau organized the first C-T team, composed of ten or fifteen men drawn from a nucleus of what Chau called “deserters and smalltime crooks, currently in refuge with one of the district chiefs.” I accepted on faith his assessment of their motivation, and agreed to supply funds, equipment, and training.⁸

We had as yet no facilities of our own to teach individual and small-unit combat skills, and I resorted once again to informal, local arrangements with MACV. While exploring operational prospects in other Delta provinces, I had already met Major Al Francisco, commander of the Special Forces team stationed at Moc Hoa in Kien Tuong Province. Like so many of his peers, he was

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more concerned to contribute to the cause than to worry about protocol, and on his own authority he agreed to work with my C-T candidates from Kien Hoa. Knowing that I was dealing with a pig in a poke, I encouraged him to pull out the stops as he tested their aptitudes and motivation, and his assurances on both counts, at training's end, gave me the confidence I needed to proceed with this tricky new venture. By the time this first team returned to Kien Hoa, Chau had set up a control element in Kien Hoa and begun target selection.⁹

The original concept called for the use of sophisticated booby traps, incendiaries, and materials toxic to livestock in areas considered to be under uncontested communist control. Chau and I proposed to limit unintended harm by such means as meticulously recording the locations of mines and booby traps, and using chemical contaminants only where they would not damage the fields of peasants living under GVN control. We recognized the possibility of civilian casualties, and suggested using leaflet drops to warn that persons using particular routes now incurred mortal danger. I rationalized all this for the benefit of headquarters: lethal devices would be planted only in areas under firm VC control, "where even civilians are perhaps less deserving of consideration than [the innocent] now being killed by indiscriminate ARVN artillery fire in contested areas."¹⁰

In practice, the lethal tactics actually employed remained more conventional than otherwise, and we did not poison any livestock or crops. But our search for means to put the VC on the defensive reflected the prevailing anxiety, the sense that only drastic measures stood any chance of stemming the tide.

A Question of Control

By mid-1964, the CIA commitment to pacification activity had become broader, in geographical terms, than it was before Operation Switchback. To run these operations, together with urban covert action and an assortment of collection and paramilitary operations against North Vietnam, COS Peer De Silva had just eighty-one operations officers. It became clear that minimally adequate supervision of all this would require more people. An early June conference in Honolulu attended by General Khanh and Secretary of State Rusk laid the groundwork for a larger commitment of U.S. advisers, and headquarters followed up on 3 June with a decision to add at least a dozen officers in the field. One would be assigned full-time to each of the eight provinces, most of them around Saigon, considered to be the most seriously threatened.¹¹

Colby denied that this amounted to a "reswitching of Switchback," but he specified that the new programs, aimed at building "grass roots resistance to

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the Viet Cong,” were not compartmented from the activities of the rest of the U.S. Mission. On the contrary, they would be “conducted in full coordination with the Ambassador, General [William] Westmoreland and the local senior American official in the provinces in question.”¹²

“Coordination” meant, in practice, considerably more than getting the informed consent of other agencies at the Country Team level. As we had when we ran the programs transferred under Operation Switchback, we again relied heavily on active participation by other local elements of the U.S. Mission. I was in effect only a visiting case officer in Kien Hoa, in the spring and summer of 1964, while I spent most of my time negotiating with province chiefs and consulting their MACV advisers in order to expand the Kien Hoa approach into six other Delta provinces. Meanwhile, Major Thomas Aaron and his MACV advisory team in Kien Hoa, fully persuaded of the merits of Chau’s station-supported programs, were already helping monitor Census-Grievance and Advance Political Action work. With the return from training of the first Counter-Terror team, local MACV officers accepted the de facto lead in planning its deployment and administration.

The encouraging results of the initial efforts in Kien Hoa thus owed as much to the efforts of the provincial MACV team—especially Tom Aaron and his intelligence adviser, Captain Ben Hord—as they did to Colonel Chau’s conceptual innovations and to the station’s logistic flexibility. The programs, in turn, especially Census-Grievance, shaped social, economic, intelligence, and military security efforts in the province, and provided much of the information used to determine priorities and judge GVN performance.¹³

For all their confidence in Colonel Chau’s ability and integrity, agency officers working with him noted that he tended to lean on weak reeds in his staff selection. This proclivity surfaced again early in his second tour of duty in Kien Hoa, and I rather timidly reported to headquarters that he was “not always the best judge of personal qualifications.” In retrospect, Chau’s practice seems to have reflected an unconscious, somewhat mandarin, tendency to prefer docility in his underlings. But he was open to discussion of personnel assignments, and by August he had at my urging begun to increase both the numbers and quality of GVN personnel assigned to station-supported programs.¹⁴

Mindful of the ill-placed confidence in GVN reporting that prevented an understanding of weaknesses in the Strategic Hamlet program, I struggled to get independent confirmation of claimed results. Although I was disposed to trust Colonel Chau, I had less experience with the district chiefs and program managers charged with implementation. Confidence in the reporting on early operational activity stemmed largely from the assiduous effort by the

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MACV team, especially Ben Hord, to investigate and verify the product of team operations.¹⁵

Early results, in June and July 1964, included groundbreaking work by Census-Grievance personnel who identified VC political cadres at levels ranging from hamlet to province. C-G interviews also identified guerrilla formations and located various facilities such as ammunition factories and medical aid stations. Early warning by C-G informants allowed preemptive GVN action to avert two VC attacks, as artillery fire on the enemy staging areas disrupted their preparations with, in one case, heavy casualties. A small Civil Guard operation based on C-G information killed three Viet Cong and captured grenades and cartridge magazines. On the political side, APA teams induced five VC—two guerrillas and three provincial liaison cadres—to rally to the government. The teams also secured the voluntary return of five GVN deserters.¹⁶

The first report of Counter-Terror activity described a 30 June night skirmish, apparently an unplanned encounter during a patrol rather than a specifically targeted raid. One VC was killed, and the team returned with an apparently authentic document it reported having found on the body. Presumably referring to Counter-Terror activity, the document said: “Here at present the enemy is acting arrogantly, and has recently formed suicide teams which move about at will. Their activities have caused confusion and created difficulties for us.”¹⁷

Whatever the authenticity of this worried VC document, CIA-sponsored activity in Kien Hoa had in fact begun producing results. The MACV advisory team, familiar with all pacification activity in the province, both military and civilian, looked on the station-supported programs as the locus of most of the GVN’s initiatives. But despite initial successes, all of us—Colonel Chau, his military advisers, and I—understood that merely doing some new things, even demonstrably productive things, did not in itself guarantee decisive impact. COS Peer De Silva made it explicit, in a June 1964 cable to Bill Colby, that the objective in Kien Hoa was to “increase results to a level at which they [are] not merely psychological but actually affect VC military and political effectiveness.” Whatever the point at which the initiative might be seen as passing to the GVN, it was clear that results in midyear represented no more than a beginning.¹⁸

The decentralization of CIA’s funding and logistic procedures created a degree of control over the use of agency money and equipment that was denied to agencies whose contributions entered GVN channels at the ministerial level. This control, exercised mainly at provincial level by the CIA case officer, kept speculation to a minimum, although not without continual vigilance. Given

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the intensity of Colonel Chau's commitment to the programs, and the absence of evidence of any corruption on his own part, it is likely that the Kien Hoa programs were largely free from the misuse of U.S. resources. But not even the assignment of a resident case officer who scrutinized each accounting could guarantee that every piaster reached its intended recipient.¹⁹

John O'Reilly, the first case officer permanently assigned to Kien Hoa, arrived in August 1964. He soon noticed that Captain Viet, in charge of C-G and APA cadres, would submit payroll accountings with the same set of initials beside the name of each payee. Only after protracted hectoring did O'Reilly start getting accountings with visibly different initials, and even then, of course, he could not be certain that all the money was getting to the intended recipients. As with every program in every province, visible activity and verified results provided the most persuasive evidence that CIA resources were being properly applied.²⁰

In the early months of the station's post-Diem programs in Kien Hoa, results came mainly in the form of intelligence on VC military forces and their intentions, and in the casualties inflicted by Counter-Terror teams. But even at this early stage, Census-Grievance was supplying information on what came to be known as the Viet Cong Infrastructure (VCI). Chau's vision of the insurgency as an essentially political phenomenon was responsible for this emphasis, which the United States adopted as mission policy during the course of 1966.

Thus, C-G workers in Kien Hoa identified 219 civilian VC cadres during the last half of June 1964, in addition to identifying and describing six guerrilla platoons totaling 130 men. Other information located two ammunition factories, two medical aid stations, and the details of two intricate courier routes linking VC-infested districts. The GVN posture in Kien Hoa, as in most of South Vietnam, was a defensive one, and the exploitation of intelligence usually came in the form of preemptive military action. Artillery fire accounted for most of this, and provincial reporting for this two-week period claimed "many" casualties in elements of the VC 535th Battalion preparing for attacks on three outposts. At least occasionally, good intelligence sparked small ground operations, such as an engagement in which the Regional Forces (RF; the renamed Civil Guard) killed three Viet Cong and captured grenades and communist documents.²¹

Chau's emphasis on the political side meant that APA teams devoted much of their effort to bringing communists and GVN deserters over to the government. During June 1964, APA efforts brought in three VC provincial liaison cadres, two guerrillas, and five Popular Forces (the renamed Self-Defense Corps) deserters. Describing these and other similarly modest results, I sug-

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gested in a report to headquarters that the validation of the station's programs would eventually be found in the "cumulative effect [of] numerous small successes." In the generally pessimistic atmosphere that prevailed in mid-1964, it did not even occur to me to try to predict when this effect might appear, or how it would be measured.²²

A New Managerial Perspective

In June 1964, Thomas Donohue replaced Cliff Strathern as chief of the station's covert action section. Donohue brought to this assignment several years of experience in Southeast Asia and a more skeptical, if no less activist, cast of mind than that of Bill Colby, Strathern, or Stuart Methven. Various of his contacts in places like Malaysia and Indonesia had articulated the Vietnam question in a way that seemed to require an answer: Why had the United States chosen to assume, in effect, the colonial burden of which the Viet Minh had forcibly relieved the French? Without questioning the importance of preventing a communist victory, Donohue saw the task as complicated both by a uniquely Vietnamese xenophobia and by the communists' appropriation of the nationalism issue. Aggravating both of these, as he saw it, were the communist affiliation or sympathies of many South Vietnamese educated in France.²³

Less disposed than some of his colleagues to see coercion as the only source of Viet Cong influence on the peasantry, Donohue thought he saw a calculated mixture of carrot and stick in the insurgents' dealings with the rural population. In this view, the VC reinforced positive themes and programs by coercing the intransigent. In the process, they created a political force that the GVN's autocratic style was ill equipped to resist. Nevertheless, when it came to a practical prescription, Donohue saw no reason to depart from that of his predecessors. The task remained the construction of a program of material improvements in village life supported by a security screen and a motivational campaign promoting anticommunist nationalism.²⁴

COS De Silva had not yet developed a personal interest in the shape of the pacification programs. Although Deputy COS Gordon Jorgensen was actively involved, Donohue, like Strathern and Methven before him, enjoyed considerable autonomy in shaping his programs. Accordingly, he began by shedding some marginal activities; among these were efforts to create anticommunist Buddhist and veterans' organizations and a black radio transmitter, purporting to be communist sponsored, whose material was so crude that it included anachronistic references to "Red China."²⁵

For these projects, Donohue substituted an exclusive emphasis on expand-

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ing and refining the programs being tested in Kien Hoa and several other provinces in the summer of 1964. Census-Grievance and Advance Political Action would constitute the motivational vehicles, using for ideological content Captain Mai's somewhat mystical nationalism. Donohue thought of this as a kind of "Vietnamese Scientology," with arcane features like "fairy and dragon totemism" useful, perhaps, to distract the cadres' attention from the instability and incompetence of the military government they served.²⁶

As had been the case during the Diem era, the CIA Station ran its pacification operations in the period after him alongside a much larger effort, directed by the central government, to assert GVN control in the countryside. Under General Nguyen Khanh, who had unseated Duong Van "Big Minh" in late January 1964, the military government renamed the Strategic Hamlet program and reactivated it as the New Life Hamlet. In theory, at least, the new version avoided the coercive measures, especially resettlement, that had plagued the Strategic Hamlet program. There was also a new effort to assign geographical priorities, and in mid-1964 the GVN and the U.S. Mission assigned the highest priority to the provinces around Saigon. Labeled Operation Hop Tac (cooperation, in Vietnamese), pacification activity in these provinces was designed to apply the so-called oil-spot principle of expansion from a secure base, beginning with Saigon-Cholon and the urban part of surrounding Gia Dinh Province.²⁷

The station told headquarters that its role in Hop Tac would include intelligence support and the coordination of APA and Counter-Terror team activity with officials charged with expanding the "oil spot." It did not transfer its assets to Hop Tac officials, but continued to control them in the same way that other participating U.S. agencies administered their own resources. This worked out to the advantage of the station programs, which survived when Hop Tac foundered under the weight of its bureaucratic complexity and persisting GVN indifference to soliciting the goodwill of its peasant constituency. In November, Ambassador Maxwell Taylor, who had replaced Cabot Lodge earlier in 1964, declared GVN pacification comatose; only "heroic treatment," he said, might revive it.²⁸

With Operation Hop Tac at a standstill and the VC threatening to cut South Vietnam in two in Quang Ngai and Binh Dinh provinces, the station continued to expand its programs in the hope that they might eventually help turn the tide. Kien Hoa remained the principal testing ground, and reports of VC reaction suggested that the programs there had already become a serious nuisance to provincial communist leadership. As of late October, people in areas of Mo Cay District under VC control were being required to get written permission to travel into GVN-controlled territory. With this restriction,

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according to an intelligence report, the communists intended to deny access for Colonel Chau's new mobile Census-Grievance teams to people living under VC administration. At a village-level meeting in September, also in Mo Cay, the party secretary discussed a renewed campaign of terrorism against GVN functionaries and offered 5,000 piasters for every Census-Grievance worker killed.²⁹

During this same period, in late 1964, Counter-Terror activity also began to provoke a communist reaction. The leader of a C-T team in Ba Tri District, returning from a skirmish with elements of an enemy company, heard that a VC squad had infiltrated his village. Reconnoitering the area, he learned that the VC were waiting for him in his own house. He crept up and threw a grenade inside, killing his uninvited guests. Other evidence of VC reaction came from the Ba Tri District chief, who reported the formation of a special VC platoon to hunt down C-T teams. He claimed that VC leaflets offered 15,000 piasters for the killing of a U.S. adviser or GVN district chief, 20,000 piasters for an ARVN officer, and 40,000 piasters for a C-T cadre.³⁰

The perennial problem of evaluating information confirming what one wanted to hear applied to all these reports. I never saw the reported leaflet, and its authenticity remained undetermined. In the case of Kien Hoa C-T opera-



Left to right: author; Lieutenant Colonel Tran Ngoc Chau; Major Andy Simko, MACV sector adviser for Kien Hoa Province; John O'Reilly, c. 1964. (Courtesy of Judy O'Reilly.)

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tions, however, harder evidence later came in the form of a document issued by the Thanh Phu District Military Section in June 1965 and later captured and authenticated. It dealt with the C-T threat to the VC in Kien Hoa Province, and warned of “‘US C-T intelligence agents,’ disguised as ordinary farmers,” who would infiltrate “liberated regions” to gather intelligence and to capture or kill



Province chief's residence, Ben Tre, Kien Hoa Province, c. 1964. (Courtesy of John O'Donnell, then USAID rural affairs officer in Kien Hoa.)



Author and Ba Tri District officer at training center in An Hiep village, Kien Hoa Province, c. 1964. (Courtesy of John O'Donnell.)

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VC cadres operating alone. The document asserted that the VC had that same week moved against a Thanh Phu District C-T team, killing one of its members. The document assigned one C-T cadre the value of three regular ARVN soldiers, and gave detailed instructions to party chapters at the village level for anti-C-T operations.³¹



Operations center, Ba Tri District, Kien Hoa Province, c. 1964. Province chief Tran Ngoc Chau at left. (Courtesy of John O'Donnell.)



Ben Tre (also known as Truc Giang), capital of Kien Hoa Province, c. 1964. Ben Tre became a symbol of antiwar sentiment in the United States after the 1968 Tet offensive, when an Air Force officer was quoted as saying it had to be destroyed in order to save it from the Viet Cong. (Courtesy of John O'Donnell.)

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Maturation in Kien Hoa

John O'Reilly soon needed no more help from me, and I could now devote more time to cloning the program elsewhere in the Delta. Meanwhile, O'Reilly and Chau, with a new provincial MACV adviser, Major Andy Simko, proceeded to refine and expand an effort now entering its second year. Until Colonel Chau left Kien Hoa in late 1965, the Census-Grievance device remained the heart of the pacification program there. Chau's method emphasized identifying individual VC cadres and working through accessible family members to get them to rally to the GVN. Failing this, a C-T team would try to capture or kill any such cadres on whom Chau had enough information to permit planning an operation with a reasonable prospect of success. In this way, the Counter-Terror teams became the second key element of Chau's pacification method, serving as a stick to be applied with some discrimination when the C-G carrot failed to attract. In practice, much C-T action simply exploited local intelligence in small-scale ambushes and raids, or occurred when teams patrolling VC turf made adventitious contact with the enemy. But as reports and captured documents showed, at least some VC security cadres saw the C-T mission in the same terms in which Chau defined it.³²

The mission of the Advance Political Action team, serving as the GVN's political presence in areas where neither side prevailed, was less precise than that of either C-G or C-T, and that made it, in O'Reilly's words, "more difficult for people to embrace." Colonel Chau did embrace it, even if some of his subordinates were less enthusiastic, but it never became as central to his method as the combination of C-G and C-T. Nevertheless, the VC attacked various APA teams during O'Reilly's service in Kien Hoa, and he took this as a communist blow to the quality of their work.³³

Chau's integrated application of U.S. resources included the economic aid delivered by the U.S. Operations Mission, now represented in Kien Hoa by Robert Mellon. O'Reilly recalled Mellon as invariably helpful; the USOM man agreed that irrigation pumps, for example, were more likely to have an impact on peasant allegiance when distributed in connection with an APA deployment than if issued in isolation from Chau's political efforts.³⁴

Although regular units of the North Vietnamese Army began infiltrating South Vietnam in late 1964, they were deployed primarily in Central Vietnam. Units that proceeded farther south relied for the most part on sanctuary along the border with Cambodia. In Kien Hoa, with its history of Viet Minh sympathies, Chau and his advisers continued to fight what amounted to a province-level civil war, in which the combatants were often known to each other by

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name. C-G and C-T teams were designed to fight precisely this kind of war, and this was exemplified after an incident in which a guerrilla sniper killed the U.S. Army adviser to an ARVN Ranger battalion operating in the province. VC propaganda after the incident depicted the sniper as a hero of the revolution, and Chau and his people thought it expedient to discourage any repetition. A C-T team infiltrated into the sniper's hamlet in VC territory, found his house, and threw grenades into it, killing him.³⁵

Any pacification asset could be misused, and Counter-Terror was especially susceptible to abuse. Chau later recalled having been acutely aware of

John O'Reilly,
first resident case
officer in Ben Tre,
c. 1966. (Courtesy
of Judy O'Reilly.)



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this, and that he had tried to minimize abuses, partly by encouraging victims to make known their complaints and then punishing the guilty. Census-Grievance constituted one of the most important devices to acquire information on C-T or other GVN malfeasance; another was Chau's practice of devoting half days, twice a week, to personal meetings with any citizen who asked to see him.³⁶

Not every complaint had merit. An old man accused provincial forces of having killed his innocent son, but when Chau investigated, testimony from a Cao Dai priest convinced him that the son had indeed been a Viet Cong who earned his fate at the hands of a C-T team. In another case, Chau determined that a C-T cadre had in fact committed the rape of which he was accused. Chau compensated the victim and her family, but could do no more to the culprit than banish him from the province, for a senior GVN official related to the offender intervened to prevent prosecution.³⁷

The best safeguard against abuses lay in rigorous supervision, and Colonel Chau made good on his promise to improve the quality of the officers assigned to station-supported programs. He named an energetic ARVN captain, also named Chau, to run the C-T teams, and within a few months Captain Chau and the station added a marine component to the program. Before I left, I had arranged for U.S. Navy Seabees to armor a sampan of the type used in Delta commerce; the Kien Hoa program used it, and later two more, to attract VC tax collectors whom the boat's C-T crew would capture or kill.³⁸

The VC eventually worked out procedures to avoid being taken in by these decoys. They had probably already done this when John O'Reilly went on an overnight patrol. It drew some fire from shore, but no close contact ensued, and O'Reilly surmised that Captain Chau had instructed the team to stay out of trouble with their adviser on board.³⁹

Like Colonel Chau and many, probably the majority, of field case officers, O'Reilly came to see the Viet Cong as applying not merely "terrorism" but a calculated mixture of carrot and stick. Thus, even while they exploited the land reform theme, they were far from mere agrarian reformers, and O'Reilly's experience led him to see them as quick to apply coercion to peasants who did not respond to gentle persuasion. He saw VC proselyting as aided by GVN activity over which Colonel Chau had little or no control; this included the depredations committed by ARVN Seventh Division troops during sweep operations through the countryside, and aerial bombing of unoffending villagers.⁴⁰

The Kien Hoa pacification method, as O'Reilly understood and helped to shape it, reflected the absence of either a compelling national ideology or a charismatic GVN leadership in Saigon. Indeed, one of the features of his stay in Vietnam was the instability of successive governments in Saigon. He

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thought Colonel Chau's proprietary approach to pacification might have been reinforced by his lack of attachment to either of the two principal figures, General Nguyen Van Thieu and Air Vice Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky, behind the removal of General Nguyen Khanh in February 1965. All of this encouraged an emphasis on local interests and issues, and fully justified, in O'Reilly's view, Chau's insistence on recruiting his cadres from the areas in which they were to be deployed. Their workaday ideology, focused on things like protection of home, family, and ancestral tombs, compensated to some degree for their lack of sophistication. Many APA cadres were barely literate, but this seemed not to matter; O'Reilly saw little evidence in Kien Hoa of a national consciousness on which a more explicitly political program might have been built. Like his colleagues before and after him, he never determined with any precision the nature of the communist influence so pervasive in the province since World War II.⁴¹

An Ad Hoc Approach to Counterinsurgency

Tran Ngoc Chau had not yet returned to Kien Hoa when the station set out in early 1964 to exploit its mandate from the military government to support local initiatives wherever they might be found. It revived some of the activity launched under the Diem government and made new contacts. In some strategically located provinces, the station found itself urging the programs on an uncomprehending province chief or a skeptical MACV adviser. This problem of communication and persuasion applied especially to the Advance Political Action team, whose transient presence and multiple functions in a given hamlet inhibited both a precisely defined mission and an unambiguous evaluation of results.

Where local leadership was enthusiastic, or at least pliable, the station got tangible if not always durable results. One of Stuart Methven's many contacts was Brigadier General Le Van Tat, a Cao Dai leader and the GVN's chief of Tay Ninh Province, the sect's principal stronghold. Tay Ninh was also the site of Nui Ba Den, a mountain sacred to the Cao Dai sect. In early 1964, it was controlled by the Viet Cong. Methven thought that retaking the peak would give the GVN a major psychological victory, but General Tat had insufficient forces with which to try this; as a Cao Dai, his authority as province chief was more nominal than real, and his support from Saigon minimal.⁴²

Accordingly, Methven supported the recruitment and training of about eighty Cao Dai "commandos," who with two platoons of Popular Forces reached the peak of Nui Ba Den on 20 May 1964. Four days later, with the mountain largely cleared of VC, General Tat, his MACV adviser, and two station officers attended the mountaintop ceremony at which Tat's men hoisted

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the GVN flag for the first time in ten years. Methven intended the station-supported irregulars to occupy the mountain indefinitely, and General Tat also occasionally sent them to project a GVN presence into one of the villages outside the secure area around the province capital. But Tat's chronic lack of energy, compounded by his proclivity to use the irregulars as his bodyguard, prevented them from achieving any lasting results.⁴³

Headquarters wanted the initial success preserved and exploited for both intelligence and psychological purposes, and proposed recruiting 5,000 men, to be deployed in five-man teams. Replying for the station, Methven sounded two themes that resonate throughout the history of CIA pacification efforts in Vietnam. The first was GVN sensitivity to U.S. support of ethnic or religious minorities, and the second was MACV sensitivity to the competition for manpower. On the first point, Methven noted that Tat had already drawn the suspicion of the ARVN Fifth Division commander with the formation of the so-called commandos. As for the second, Methven was reluctant to jeopardize existing collegial relationships with the local U.S. military at a time when Tat was recruiting more Regional and Popular Forces to meet the higher strength level now eligible for MACV support. Methven therefore wanted to hold the expansion of the irregulars to an additional 200 men. It is not clear how many of these were in fact recruited, and the weakness of GVN leadership in Tay Ninh would in any case probably have kept them from doing anything significant.⁴⁴

Where provincial leadership was not fully committed to the program—or at least, like General Tat, receptive to advice—results were invariably disappointing. Gia Dinh, the province surrounding Saigon, provided an example of the problem in July 1964. The provincial APA director leaked to the station the proceedings of a meeting at which the district chiefs had requested and obtained from the province chief full operational control of APA teams in their respective districts. The Vietnamese informant asserted that in some districts this would end the program, for the teams would wind up serving as tax collectors and hamlet police. But he urged against immediate station representations, partly as a matter of self-protection and partly to see how in fact the district chiefs would perform. Surviving correspondence does not tell us how this worked out.⁴⁵

Kien Phong Province, containing part of the Mekong Delta's Plain of Reeds, was a longtime VC refuge and base area. The station had been working there since September 1963 to set up an early version of the APA team, but not until April 1964 were there any visible accomplishments. Even then, the first results came in the anodyne form of a community self-help schoolhouse

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repair project. The Kien Phong version of Census-Grievance had “fallen flat,” partly, it seems, because the station wanted C-G cadres to operate in heavily VC-influenced communities. In this province, the only activity then meeting expectations consisted of “30 covert intelligence collection cadres,” the inflated language apparently referring to ordinary paid informants. But one of these warned of an impending attack on the Kien Van District Headquarters. A preemptive ground operation killed fifteen VC, captured twenty-one, and seized a substantial quantity of munitions. During April 1964, several other such warnings generated similar reactions, with similar results.⁴⁶

In Chuong Thien Province, an impoverished stretch of the Camau peninsula, the generally low level of education limited the potential of some forty APA cadres who completed training in April 1964. The province chief, an otherwise intelligent and aggressive soldier who had revamped the civilian provincial services and beefed up local military forces, had promised vigorous leadership for the station-supported program. But when the cadres returned from training at Cat Lo, he entrusted them to his civil affairs and psychological warfare officer—a “grinning idiot,” in the case officer’s view—simply because the man had nothing else to do.⁴⁷

As these examples illustrate, the need for quick results to help reverse the GVN’s decline in rural South Vietnam ran up against a variety of intractable human factors that made it impossible to force the pace. In late summer, I had written for the station: “[I]n Go Cong [Province], for example, the pace has been determined by the scarcity of . . . candidates with the minimum personal qualifications required of APA personnel. In Long An, relatively well supplied with educated young people, the development of the program has been severely hampered by the appointment of four province chiefs [in] less than six months. In Kien Tuong, a hapless province chief and a nearly uneducable provincial staff have obliged the Station to adopt a painstaking step-by-step indoctrination of the officers and functionaries involved in the management of the program.”⁴⁸ In this context, I recall an agonized exchange between me and then-Deputy Chief of Station Gordon Jorgensen. I thought the cadre training programs too short to impart adequate skills, and he thought the situation so desperate that we had to get people into the field to stem VC inroads before it was too late. Neither of us could bring himself say that we might both be right.

Despite these frustrations and the potential competition for Vietnamese manpower, the early results of the post-Diem programs led not only Ambassador Maxwell Taylor but also MACV commander General William Westmoreland to recommend their expansion. Reporting on the 17 August briefing that elicited this reaction, covert action chief Tom Donohue noted that the

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integration of station programs with the overall GVN pacification effort, especially in the context of the New Life Hamlet, had not yet been fully worked out. Nevertheless, he expected the APA teams to make a direct contribution. They could, for example, explain to the inhabitants of prospective New Life Hamlets how village defenses, supported by a military reaction force, would generate the physical security that the Strategic Hamlet program had largely failed to provide.⁴⁹

In the fall of 1964, when many provinces had not yet received a resident case officer, we relied in part on outside observers to evaluate the results of our efforts. One such observer was Everett Bumgardner of USIS, who supervised his agency's support of the Vietnam Information Service (VIS). Replying to a question apparently posed during a visit to headquarters, Bumgardner said he saw no duplication between provincial VIS teams and the station's APA teams. The latter, being armed, could penetrate into contested areas not accessible to VIS, and Bumgardner said that when on occasion his people did accompany a military operation into areas under VC influence, they found VIS material carried in by APA teams, and heard from the villagers about the APA *modus operandi*.⁵⁰

As described to the VIS functionaries, this involved little more than talk about the weather, the rice crop, and "politics," but Bumgardner thought the APA team enjoyed a material advantage in being drawn for the most part from the local peasantry. Thus, even if the VIS people were armed to give them the same geographical mobility, they would still be "bureaucratic, white-collar workers." On the cautionary side, Bumgardner noted the proclivity of VIS people to embellish their reporting of their own accomplishments, and he recommended an APA inspectorate along the lines of the one set up by USIS for the VIS.⁵¹

Our experience in places like Chuong Thien and Gia Dinh had already made us painfully aware of the potential gap between promise and performance. As early as July, my report on political and paramilitary programs noted that APA would not succeed without close and continual station guidance at the province level. Vietnamese supervisors, left to themselves, would often let the program degenerate either "into a primitive agent net or into a strictly military operation." In the desperate circumstances of late 1964, the 2,900 Vietnamese on the cadre payroll were, on the whole, "making a difference."⁵²

Escalation

The question was whether the difference was large enough to matter. At the end of the year, the station was preoccupied with the prospect that, what-

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ever the validity of its pacification concepts, the war was about to be lost. In October, Hanoi's Central Military Party Committee ordered the opening of the 1964–1965 winter–spring campaign, and for the first time deployed organic units of the North Vietnamese Army to the South. These included four infantry regiments and a number of independent infantry plus combat specialty and combat support battalions. George Allen, one of the agency's most experienced Vietnam analysts, was one of those who now predicted that without the commitment of U.S. troops the GVN would collapse.⁵³

In a jeremiad addressed to Ambassador Taylor in early January 1965, Peer De Silva recalled the expressions of war weariness emanating from the ARVN high command as early as the previous May. He rehearsed the deleterious effects on Vietnamese morale of U.S. reluctance to use decisive force against the North during 1964, the year of Lyndon Johnson's bid for election to the presidency. This hesitation persisted, he noted, even after the Gulf of Tonkin incidents in early August involving American destroyers and North Vietnamese gunboats. De Silva concluded that the GVN found itself in even more parlous circumstances at the end of 1964 than it had a year earlier. Without U.S. escalation outside South Vietnam's borders to deal with Hanoi's support and direction of the insurgency, he asserted, pacification would fail and the war would be lost.⁵⁴

Noting the GVN's internal conflicts and continuing Buddhist dissidence, De Silva argued that to set governmental stability as a precondition of escalation beyond South Vietnam's borders would result in the collapse of the Saigon government. "We can then only take refuge in the rationale that the domestic failings of the [South Vietnamese] nation were beyond our government's power to correct or retrieve, although this rationale would seem no more defensible than would the consequences be acceptable." The rationale was a lot more defensible than De Silva was prepared to admit, but his conclusion accurately conveyed the spirit in which he and his station—indeed the entire U.S. Mission—reacted to the continuing decline of the GVN's authority.⁵⁵

CHAPTER 8

The People's Action Team

In the gloomy atmosphere of late 1964, the ineffectual Nguyen Khanh concentrated on fending off his ARVN competitors for power while the GVN hold on the countryside continued to recede. Ambassador Taylor proclaimed in October that the task was “to get a maximum of pacification effort in South Viet-Nam with a minimum contribution from the central government in Saigon.” Perhaps in response to this imperative, COS De Silva flew to Quang Ngai with the USOM chief on 2 November to inspect a variant of the APA team that the station and USOM had begun supporting the previous April. Until then, De Silva had displayed no interest in managing pacification programs, leaving the initiative in this area to DCOS Gordon Jorgensen and officers such as Stuart Methven, Tom Donohue, Ralph Johnson, and me. Indeed, he had earlier said that he wanted to redirect the station, away from pacification operations toward intelligence collection, and Methven was startled by the conversion that De Silva underwent in Quang Ngai. The COS returned looking to Methven “as if he had found God.”¹

The “Quang Ngai experiment,” as De Silva first labeled it, resembled most of the station’s other pacification programs in that it responded to an initiative by local Vietnamese authorities to assert a GVN presence where neither the military nor the regular bureaucracy had one. The “experiment” had begun with joint station and embassy support to a fifteen-man Popular Forces “commando team” proposed to station officer Ralph Johnson by the chief of Tu Nghia District in Quang Ngai Province. Johnson supplied weapons, uniforms, a training team, and cash bonuses for successful operations, while Frank Scotton, a U.S. Information Service officer, and local employees of the Vietnam Information Service undertook motivational training. The provincial economic

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aid representative, Robert Kelly, was also an early participant, arranging for technical and probably also material assistance to targeted villages.²

Johnson's original intention reflected the agency's ambivalence about resuming a major role in rural pacification in South Vietnam. The effort in Tu Nghia emphasized propaganda and political action, and Johnson expected oversight on the American side to come primarily from USIS and USOM, with the station supporting the teams' self-defense capability. But the Tu Nghia team soon began inflicting casualties on the VC at eight times the rate of the territorial forces, and it became clear that support of its paramilitary activity required more active CIA participation. Accordingly, in May, the station assigned an officer, detailed from the military, to represent it in Quang Ngai.³

The province constituted the principal stronghold of one of the older non-communist nationalist parties, the Vietnam Quoc Dan Dang, and the ARVN province chief, a VNQDD member, encouraged the recruitment of party loyalists. Otherwise almost identical to the Advance Political Action team, the Quang Ngai teams' greater size and firepower reflected the fact that Central Vietnam (Annam) south of the 17th parallel had always hosted more Viet Cong combat forces than had the lowland provinces of South Vietnam. Much of the area, from lower Quang Nam Province south through Tuy Hoa, had remained under uncontested Viet Minh control from the end of World War II to the implementation of the Geneva Accords beginning in mid-1954. Even after the regroupment of some Viet Minh to Hanoi, the communists retained their access to the area's manpower and material resources. In addition, the foothills and plateaus of the Annamite chain provided safe areas for larger combat formations than could be maintained in the flat, sometimes flooded, terrain of the Mekong Delta.⁴

Always eclectic in his approach, Ralph Johnson supplemented the "commando" teams, which De Silva later named the People's Action Teams (PAT), with payments to police informants and support for armed drama teams, propaganda broadcasts over provincial radio, and "black" teams posing as VC in order to identify communist cadres. Johnson proposed to use the security operations of the teams to cover the rebuilding of a "virtually non-existent" provincial administration. To this end, he and USOM supported local training programs, with USOM providing technical instruction and the station paying for "motivational, political action and psywar training." Hoping to encourage mutual understanding between the villagers and local GVN authorities, Johnson also began trying, with USOM, to help set up "district assemblies," monthly meetings at which farmers and officials would discuss topical questions like the allocation of U.S. aid resources.⁵

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None of these efforts would succeed unless the cadres responsible for them could operate in reasonable safety. Because of the pervasive communist presence in Quang Ngai, this meant that the relatively well-armed PAT soon became the heart of the pacification effort there. The Tu Nghia unit grew to forty men, a number that became the standard for the next two years. By mid-summer three teams had been deployed, each equipped with nine M-1 rifles, twenty-five submachine guns, seventeen pistols, hand grenades, and grenade launchers.⁶

De Silva's euphoric report of his first visit to Quang Ngai did not describe the civic action side of the PATs' mission, but it listed the gratifying results of their security operations. By mid-October, the teams had killed a reported total of 167 Viet Cong and captured 236 others, along with a "high proportion of weapons." PAT losses totaled 6 killed, 22 wounded, and four weapons lost, but no missing in action and no desertions. Whether or not the VC casualty figures were entirely accurate, the local MACV advisers gave the teams an unqualified endorsement. During De Silva's visit, Sector Adviser—that is, provincial MACV military adviser—Major Haskell asserted that they were the only local forces of any value in a province almost bereft of uncontested GVN territory, and indeed were "highly successful and highly respected." Anticipating MACV objections to CIA inroads on military manpower, De Silva solicited and received assurances from Haskell that the PATs robbed ARVN and MACV of no usable potential; on the contrary, Haskell wanted the station to pull out the stops to expand the program.⁷

De Silva's visit to Quang Ngai took him not only into Tu Nghia District, surrounding the province capital, but by helicopter into Nghia Hanh District, where after several kilometers by road and a kilometer or so on foot, the party found the team engaged in the kinds of good works intended to inspire villager confidence and trust. While one gave haircuts, others repaired roofs and cleaned a well, and still others cleared a path. The province chief, Major Le Khac Ly, told De Silva that the team would spend up to three days in a single hamlet, living with the peasants but paying for their own keep, before moving on. In this fashion, they would proceed through their district, or as much of it as they could penetrate, before beginning the cycle again.⁸

The security operations that so impressed the COS were at least in theory an adjunct to the civic action program, and relied for their effectiveness on information provided by the villagers. A perimeter security screen was standard practice, and the teams set up ambushes when tips from their hosts predicted the encroachment of VC forces; if these were too large to handle without help, the team would call for help from district headquarters. In Ralph Johnson's

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view, the “key to all this, of course, was the fact that these teams were welcomed . . . by the inhabitants who sheltered [and] protected [them,] and volunteered information about the VC.”⁹

USIS officer Everett Bumgardner visited Quang Ngai and discovered evidence that performance was true to the principle. One team had so thoroughly engaged the inhabitants of its operating area that they gave it ample advance notice of an impending attack by a VC battalion on the hamlet in which the PAT was billeted. The VC sent in a series of squad-size parties to locate the team, only to have the villagers misdirect them into prepared team ambushes. By the time the VC commander decided to commit the main body, ARVN support had arrived. The communists ultimately lost seventy-five dead, seventeen individual weapons, a recoilless rifle, and a radio.¹⁰

Enlisting the Support of the Mission Council

This was the way it was all supposed to work, but success bred its own problem. Upon his return to Saigon, De Silva briefed MACV commander General Westmoreland on his experience. Acknowledging that most of the cadres were drawn from the Popular Forces, the COS was at pains to distinguish PAT activity from that of the MACV-supported PF. Whereas the lightly armed and village-based PF maintained a purely defensive stance, he said, the PAT undertook aggressive action under the direction of the district chief.¹¹

De Silva emphasized the democratic character of PAT organization—each team elected its own commander—and a system of rotating leaves of absence that allowed the teams to remain permanently deployed, with no headquarters or base facility. De Silva thought Westmoreland uncomprehending of these two aspects, but told headquarters that he found Ambassador Taylor “enthusiastic in support.” In addition, Deputy Ambassador U. Alexis Johnson and USAID chief James Killen had agreed to go on an unannounced inspection of the Quang Ngai teams on 7 November. Apparently believing that the Quang Ngai experiment represented an entirely original concept in pacification technique, the COS added that he might bring cadre personnel from Kien Hoa and Tay Ninh to be trained in Quang Ngai. These would then return home to try to “transplant the principle and the purpose.”¹²

De Silva followed up his first briefings of the U.S. Mission Council’s members with a concerted campaign to win their active cooperation. On 19 November, he reported USOM director Killen to be “whole-heartedly enthusiastic and fully committed,” and Deputy Ambassador Johnson as “interested and receptive, but rather wary” of the program’s potential to provoke bureaucratic

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competition. This was more than De Silva could say about General Westmoreland, who, "to understate the matter, is less than enthusiastic." Ambassador Taylor had prodded Westmoreland into acknowledging PAT successes and the instructive value of the experiment, and the general now offered to "take over the project and develop it 'in a proper manner.'" De Silva summarily declined the offer, and reported that he would continue to resist "the idea of MACV absorbing this activity," because "the results would be predictably fatal."¹³

Ambassador Taylor was at that moment planning a visit to Washington, and De Silva sought to consolidate his support of the PAT. In a memorandum to him that reflected either ignorance or a categorical dismissal of all previous U.S. and GVN pacification efforts, the COS asserted that "we have had, over the years, absolutely no success in coping" with the civilian Viet Cong organization, the "infrastructure." ARVN had failed even to "touch, let alone harm this base of subversive support," and the Regional and Popular Forces also had demonstrated their inadequacy.¹⁴

De Silva asserted that the Quang Ngai experiment had shown the way out of this predicament, offering a means of "linking [the] GVN presence to the population at the household level, to win its confidence and protection, to obtain intelligence concerning the VC, and to act on that intelligence." The COS anticipated discussion of the concept during Taylor's stay in Washington, and for reference purposes listed the salient features of the PAT he had already described in earlier reporting to headquarters. He also noted the emphasis on political instruction and "emotional motivation," as well as the selection of PAT members from the districts in which they were to be deployed. Indoctrination constituted the core of the PAT concept, as De Silva understood it, and he saw the potential for expansion as restricted only by the availability of sufficiently charismatic instructors.¹⁵

In the same memorandum, De Silva presented an argument that accounts at least in part for USOM chief Killen's enthusiasm and Westmoreland's reserve. The COS said he saw the problem of "dealing with the VC where they have mingled with the population at large [as one] for which both ARVN and MACV are singularly unsuited." That responsibility should go instead to the province chiefs and the Interior Ministry, "supported by USOM with whatever CIA advice and input are requested or required." PATs would constitute special police units, not military forces, and De Silva did not shrink from the implication that this might lead to the entire Popular Forces structure, at least in some provinces, moving from Defense Ministry control to that of the Interior Ministry.¹⁶

De Silva called for more action against North Vietnam to restrict the flow

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of men and materiel to the South. He predicted that, with this accomplished and with Viet Cong “penetration and subversion of the population amongst whom they live . . . suppressed and controlled,” ARVN and MACV would enjoy more success against the VC regulars. But the suppression of the VC organization had to be seen as a “psychological, political and spiritual war which distinguishes the war here from classical war, and which I am convinced is susceptible to solution by civil and civic actions spawned in the local populations.”¹⁷

Confident that he had come upon a strategy capable of defeating the insurgency, COS De Silva asked Bill Colby, then Far East division chief, to show his two PAT memoranda to DCI John McCone and Deputy Director for Plans Richard Helms. Colby did so, attaching them to a memorandum of his own in which he stated his support for both the PAT concept and De Silva’s recommendations for military action to inhibit infiltration from the North. But he accompanied his endorsement with a trenchant observation on its major weakness. De Silva’s presentation, he said, “speaks convincingly of the neutralization and elimination of the VC infrastructure, [but] it does not provide for the replacement of the infrastructure by positive local political institutions to prevent VC reinfiltration and subversion.”¹⁸

Intimately familiar with both the insurgency and the bureaucratic environment in which the U.S. Mission tried to help the GVN combat it, Colby saw what he considered two other flaws in De Silva’s proposal. First, it did not provide for a permanent community self-defense force to replace the PAT when it moved on. Second, it assigned to USOM a responsibility that the agency was ill equipped to discharge: “The USOM approach is normally that of the technical adviser; and USOM officers are not, as a rule, operationally oriented.” Accordingly, Colby feared that USOM direction of the program might tend toward the “technical and formal rather than [the] operational and flexible.”¹⁹

Colby cabled headquarters’ endorsement to Saigon, apparently (the text has not been found) without stating his reservations either about local GVN institutions or about self-defense forces and USOM limitations. De Silva replied on 26 November. He noted that five forty-man teams were now active in Quang Ngai, and four more would be deployed by the end of the year. The key to expansion remained the availability of qualified trainers, and three new five-man groups were being prepared.²⁰

Ralph Johnson was about to begin a survey of several provinces in I and II Corps, covering Central Vietnam, and De Silva assured Colby that he was alert to two potentially troublesome aspects of PAT expansion. Two of the generals on Westmoreland’s staff, Richard Stilwell and William DePuy, had reacted to

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the Quang Ngai experiment as reflecting adversely on MACV's performance against the insurgency. In this context, De Silva said he recognized that any expansion using manpower already enrolled in a MACV-supported program would intensify the opposition to it.²¹

Furthermore, De Silva said, "we must at all cost avoid the appearance of CIA starting up another [*sic*] private army. This is in fact not the case, but you realize we are prone to that kind of allegation." The answer, as the COS saw it, was to represent agency participation as simply a response to "a province chief's request for special support in his local pacification effort." Ambassador Taylor accepted this logic in a 15 December telegram to the Department of State in which he specified that "this venture does not constitute a re-entry by CIA into the paramilitary field in Vietnam." It represented merely "CIA support and guidance of what are essentially local Vietnamese initiatives of a most commendable sort." So far as the GVN was concerned, "we have briefed Minister of Interior Vien in detail. He is fully in support and only urges that we go faster."²²

De Silva acknowledged that accelerated expansion would require not only more Vietnamese instructors but a larger commitment of agency officers. As of late 1964, he had only twenty-two officers assigned full-time to the pacification programs. Given anticipated growth not only in PAT but also in the Delta programs, he anticipated having to double this complement before the end of 1965.²³

Colby promised to meet the station's needs. He also reported that he had seen General DePuy in Washington, presumably as a member of the Taylor party, and that DePuy had declared hamlet-level pacification outside the capability of either ARVN or MACV. DePuy cited the need for things like a local militia, police auxiliaries, and peasant unions and cooperatives, which in his view required direction by USOM and CIA. Far from merely abdicating any MACV role, as Colby understood him, he wanted CIA to feel free to "borrow" military personnel to help with the paramilitary side of local training programs.²⁴

De Silva's combative reply illustrated his eagerness to challenge what he regarded as the failure of the military, both Vietnamese and American, to compete with the Viet Cong for control of the rural population. He labeled DePuy's endorsement of CIA engagement in hamlet self-defense as nothing but a smoke-screen, designed to keep the station out of province-level planning and direction of pacification resources. The COS added that, at his insistence, a review of the pacification command structure at province and district level would be the sole topic of two impending Mission Council meetings. He made it clear that he expected these to produce further confrontation with MACV.²⁵

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De Silva disclaimed any desire for “jurisdictional fights or intramural competition,” arguing that if rapidly growing “Viet Cong penetration and domination of the rural population” were not halted and reversed, “the size, equipment, and state of training of the [Vietnamese armed forces] will become irrelevant.” The COS saw the station’s efforts as devoted to finding ways of dealing with the GVN’s decline, and he acknowledged the potential for bureaucratic friction as “we poke into jurisdictional holdings” that might conceal operational potential hitherto undeveloped. Himself a West Point graduate and former army colonel, De Silva served notice that he expected Colby’s support for his pugnacious approach to MACV: “I know you agree that it would be reprehensible for us not to poke about if we observe valid reason for doing so.”²⁶

Defending the New Concept

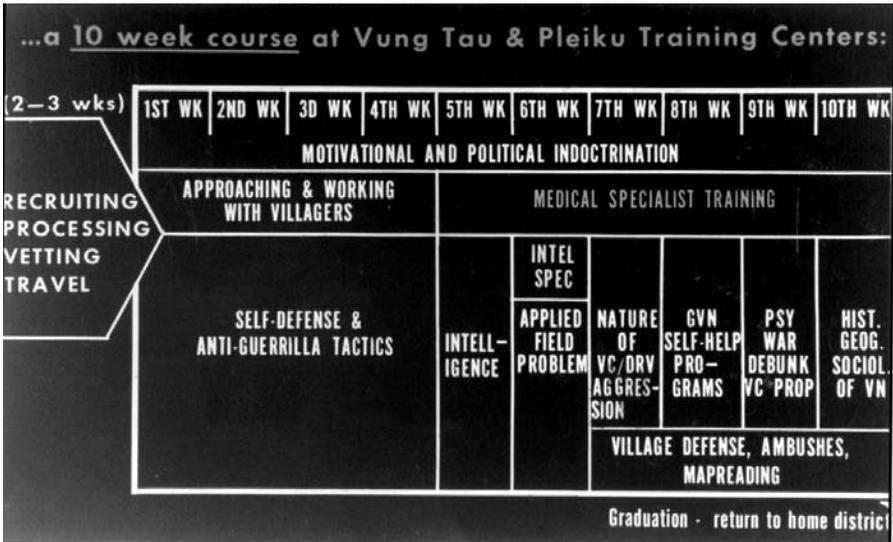
Although far too few to have a decisive effect even in one province, the PATs and their smaller counterparts in Kien Hoa and elsewhere had by the end of 1964 established themselves as the only GVN assets aggressively seeking to expand the government’s popular base in the countryside. To be sure, the GVN had revived the Strategic Hamlet under the New Life Hamlet label, and where this program exploited anticommunist motivation of long standing, as with Catholic villagers, it, too, had the potential to extend the government’s reach. The very scarcity of such successes in late 1964 and the GVN’s continuing losses of rural territory and population presumably account for the ability of the CIA’s modest programs to dominate at that time the American debate over pacification.

With respect to the GVN, there is no evidence that the military junta was conducting any pacification debate at all except when forced into it by American representations. Ngo Dinh Diem and his brothers Nhu and Can had at least wrestled with the question, however unsuccessfully, while the series of military governments that followed them, in 1964 and 1965, look in retrospect almost totally passive. From this perspective, the station’s preoccupation with provincial-level liaison seems not only reasonable but inescapable.

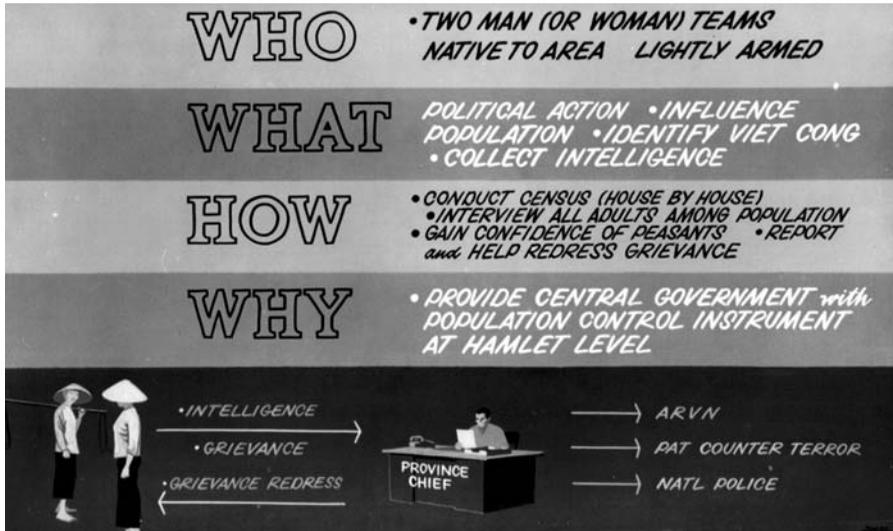
In January 1965, Peer De Silva elaborated his pacification theory in two papers for the Mission Council. His theory posited a “unity of three,” in which the first element, civic action, generated the goodwill that induced the population to provide information on the VC. This second element, intelligence, led to the third, namely, exploitation by military action. Applied on a sufficiently broad scale in areas not yet under solid VC military dominance, this technique would, in De Silva’s opinion, gradually halt and reverse the government’s

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continuing loss of land and people to the communists. In these papers, the COS emphasized the fundamental importance of creating empathy through repeated contact with the villagers by cadres drawn from the communities in which they worked.²⁷



People's Action Team briefing chart, c. 1965.



Census-Grievance briefing chart, c. 1965.

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De Silva's conceptual efforts resembled those of Ed Lansdale, a decade earlier, in their aim to deny the Viet Cong their access to a base of popular support by stimulating sympathy for the GVN and opposition to the communists. The local successes of the Quang Ngai teams and their smaller counterparts in the South, coming as they did in the midst of a generally decaying GVN position in the countryside, lent the argument powerful support.

It may have been these successes, or perhaps unwillingness to risk conveying a dog-in-the-manger mentality, that discouraged Bill Colby from repeating to Saigon the well-taken points he had made to the DCI. Meanwhile, despite De Silva's insistence on the essentially civilian nature of the PATs, the COS proposed to judge their success exclusively in terms of the destruction of VC military forces and the VC infrastructure. Stimulation of local participation in a popularly based government did not appear as an explicit objective.

Like Lansdale, De Silva described the rural mentality in terms that projected his own political values more than they reflected any empirical investigation of peasant attitudes. He assumed that the villagers shared his own abhorrence of communism, and that the VC relied exclusively on coercion—"terror"—to build and maintain influence. At the same time, he was uneasily aware that the GVN had failed to convince the peasantry of its beneficent intentions. De Silva reflected this inconsistency when he hinted that distaste for communism did not necessarily imply loyalty to the GVN. In a dispatch of early February 1965, he stipulated that "the degree to which there is latent receptivity in favor of local authority" affected the prospects for PAT success.²⁸

The Quang Ngai Experiment Goes National

National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy and John McNaughton, an assistant to Defense Secretary McNamara, visited Saigon in early February 1965. During a conference at the Embassy on the 4th, Peer De Silva briefed the Bundy party on PAT. On this occasion, he offered a variation on his earlier statement of the PAT objective, defining it now in terms of getting the villagers to "reject the VC." Ambassador Taylor confirmed that he wanted to expand the program, but expressed concern about depriving other forces of leadership cadre. De Silva responded by defending the PAT formula as indispensable, and rehearsed again the "unity of three" principle and its application in the villages. General Westmoreland flattered the PAT concept with imitation when he announced that he had arranged for Frank Scotton, the young USIS officer who had supervised the motivational training of the first Quang Ngai team, to

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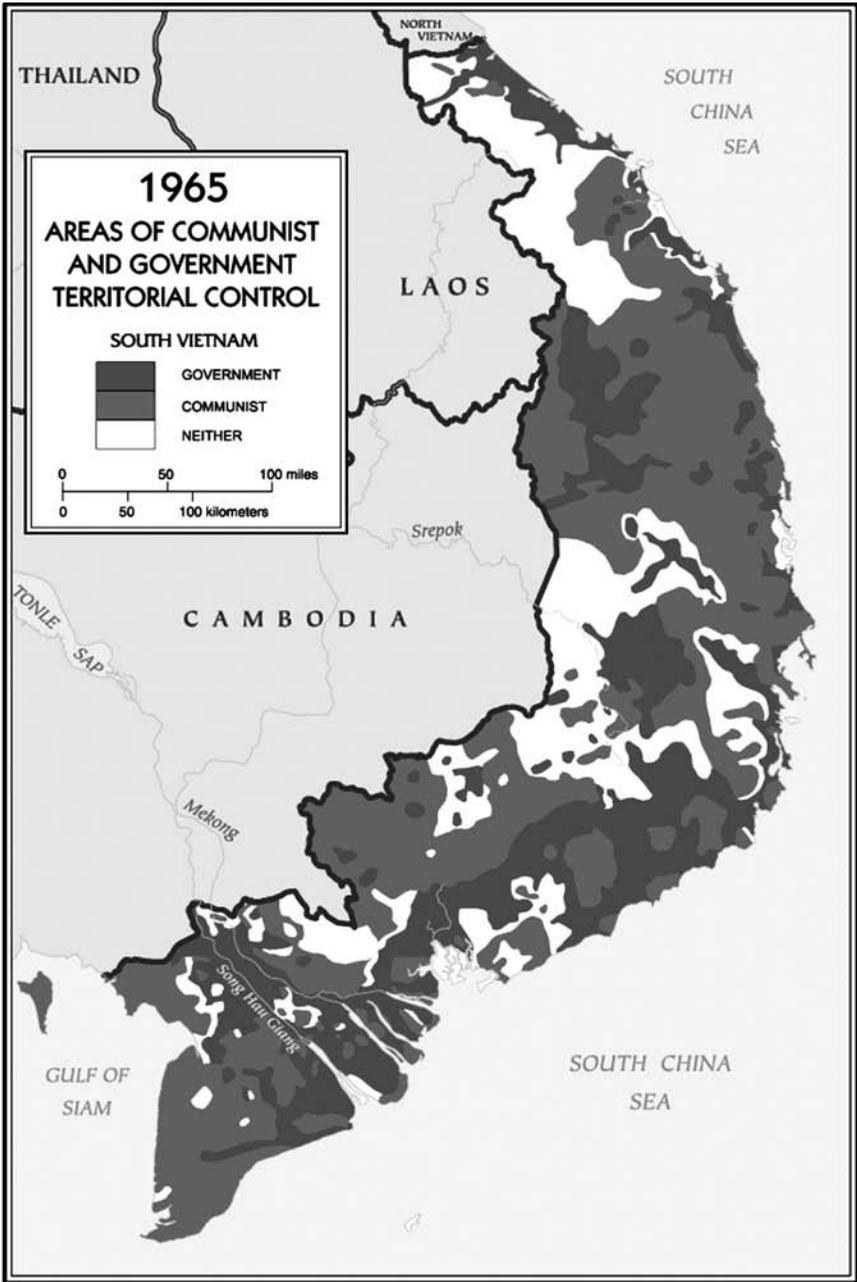
prepare a group of U.S. Army Special Forces officers to form similar "special platoons" in Gia Dinh Province.²⁹

This discussion introduced the first consideration of problems inherent in large-scale expansion of local CIA initiatives. Ambassador Taylor wanted to avoid the kind of friction that direct CIA funding of CIDG units had provoked with the Diem government, and he hoped to persuade the Ministry of Interior to sponsor the new program. White House official Chester Cooper, a former CIA analyst, noted the advantages of devolving Vietnamese management and CIA support down to the district level, and asked whether subordination to the ministry did not risk smothering the program in bureaucracy. The failure of that bureaucracy had led to ad hoc CIA support of local initiatives in the first place, and the ambassador could reply only that he and the station understood the danger and hoped to avoid it.³⁰

The problem could not be solved, of course, by anything less than a fundamental transformation of the GVN bureaucracy and its political leadership, something that would obviate the need for local projects, sponsored by either CIA or anyone else. Such transformation not being, at best, an immediate prospect, the station persisted with its local efforts. After its survey of Central Vietnam, it installed the PAT in Binh Dinh Province and made plans for Phu Yen and several other provinces. Prime Minister Phan Huy Quat approved extending the program to the montagnards, and this, as we shall see, brought the station back into the Central Highlands.³¹

In the coastal lowlands of Binh Dinh and Phu Yen, the station found little to build on. The chief of Binh Dinh, himself a Buddhist, told Stuart Methven that Catholics constituted the only reliable element there, and that men for two of the proposed four PATs would be Catholic refugees whom the VC had recently forced to flee their homes. The GVN's position in Phu Yen was perhaps even worse, and a CIA report said that "little of the province is under GVN control except for district and province towns and some of the main lines of communication."³²

The station tackled these challenges on the same improvisational basis as in Quang Ngai. Methven arranged for Robert Kelly, the Quang Ngai USOM officer, to supervise the Binh Dinh program in concert with the new province chief, an old friend from Quang Ngai. In Phu Yen, a Vietnamese employee of USIS who had also worked with the original Tu Nghia District PAT in Quang Ngai Province, was to undertake the motivational training. But it was already clear that local training programs produced unacceptably uneven results, and Tom Donohue, running the station's cadre programs from Saigon, announced in late January that all training, other than that for the montagnards, would be moved to Vung Tau.³³



CIA estimate of areas under government and communist control as of 1965.

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The Bundy visit and Ambassador Taylor's continuing endorsement of the PAT concept did not dissolve the tension between De Silva and Westmoreland. The general wrote that he saw De Silva's ideas on the subject as more a program proposal than a generally applicable doctrine, and he made it clear that he expected the MACV-supported Popular Forces to perform essentially the same function, once they were "properly trained and motivated." At the moment, however, he saw room for both programs, and he said he proposed to accept his staff's recommendation that he agree with the expansion plan for 1965 that De Silva had presented to the Mission Council.³⁴

De Silva's starchy reply asserted that his concept did indeed represent an operational doctrine, and that its application in Quang Ngai had demonstrated the futility of developing pacification programs at any but the local level. In any case, he saw the jurisdictional overlap that Westmoreland professed to fear as entirely nonexistent, and Westmoreland's projected retraining of the Popular Forces as a distant prospect. The COS added that, while he welcomed MACV's agreement, Westmoreland should understand that the COS's recent presentation was intended only for its audience's information; "it was in no way a request for agreement or approval."³⁵

On the Brink of Collapse

The near collapse of the GVN position in II Corps, covering the Central Highlands and the coastal provinces of lower Annam, rendered this argument academic, for the time being. On 28 February 1965, the station reported "an alarmingly rapid erosion of the GVN position," as "provincial capitals and district towns have been progressively isolated (in some cases abandoned) [and] ARVN Regional and Popular Force units have been decimated in increasingly large scale actions. Finally, the Viet Cong have overtly assumed effective control over more and more hamlets in the countryside. . . . In all, the GVN is losing in II Corps." The station documented this conclusion in depressing detail. In Darlac, the site of the original CIDG program, the station's ten montagnard PATs represented "almost the sole effective fighting asset in the province, excepting regular ARVN units." The VC were infiltrating the "land development centers," presumably the former CIDG area development centers, and the station's teams were deployed around the province capital, trying to "rebuild village defenses . . . train the local militia . . . and instill some backbone and willingness to fight among their montagnard brethren."³⁶

Things were going no better in the lowland districts of II Corps. Plans to form PATs in Binh Tuy Province suddenly looked impractical after the loss

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of a district capital and the destruction of an ARVN company. Binh Dinh's four PATs had been withdrawn to Qui Nhon, the provincial capital, to complete their "motivational training." The best of the four had come from Hoai Nhon District, the "scene of the recent VC offensive against Bang Son where five GVN companies were lost." Pacification operations there were clearly impossible, and the province chief worried that CIA might now conclude that the cause was lost and withdraw its support. In Phu Yen, the province chief lamented that he felt like the victim of a "Viet Cong squeeze play between Binh Dinh to his north and Khanh Hoa to the south." He was doing his best with his PATs, but told his case officer he felt that "most of the U.S. effort as well as his own government's stability [*sic*] is 'too little, too late.'"³⁷

De Silva would not admit that the situation might be irretrievable. He told headquarters that the combination of CIA flexibility, increased field staffing, and the station's "determination not to allow [its] programs to lose their identity or be swept along with the losing flotsam" might allow these efforts, "limited as they are at present," to "provide the psychological toehold for recapturing the offensive in the future." He conceded, however, that the prospects for the PAT program and for pacification efforts in general depended on the outcome of the communist military campaign.³⁸

Always racked by internal frictions, the Vietnamese military junta broke under the stress of accelerating military reverses. The final spasm resulted in the late-February 1965 ouster of junta chairman General Khanh, who went into exile in the United States. Disarray in the GVN both reflected and aggravated its deteriorating position in the countryside, and McGeorge Bundy and other top administration officials pressed for retaliation against Hanoi. On 2 March, the United States launched Operation Rolling Thunder, its first campaign of systematic aerial bombing of North Vietnam. Six days later the first American combat units arrived in Vietnam when two Marine battalions landed at Da Nang to protect the airfield there.³⁹

These moves did not visibly dampen the communists' momentum, and the administration was faced with the options of further escalation or probable GVN collapse. On 6 April, President Lyndon Johnson authorized U.S. ground forces to undertake offensive operations in Vietnam. In May, the army's 173rd Airborne Brigade arrived in Central Vietnam; the Fourth Marine Regiment then landed farther up the coast. President Johnson raised the ante in July by authorizing massive B-52 bombing of communist targets in South Vietnam. He approved an additional 50,000 troops for Vietnam, and committed himself to providing an additional 50,000 before the end of the year. But even that proved insufficient, and American forces in Vietnam grew to more than 183,000 by

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the end of 1965. The first major engagement took place in November, when a brigade of the First Cavalry Division battled three North Vietnamese regiments in the Ia Drang valley in the mountains of II Corps.⁴⁰

By this time, the station had been alerted by one influential player to the domestic political considerations that limited the time available to secure victory in South Vietnam. Senator Henry Jackson (D-WA) visited Saigon in the spring of 1965, and in a conversation with the COS and Tom Donohue estimated that the administration had about eighteen months in which to turn things around before public opinion forced an end to the enterprise.⁴¹

But there was little the station or anyone else could do in II Corps until U.S. forces halted North Vietnamese and Viet Cong advances, for GVN forces had proved unequal to the task. Thus, while the Johnson administration poured men and materiel into Vietnam, the II Corps pacification programs marked time. Gordon Jorgensen, named chief of station after Peer De Silva was wounded by a VC car bomb detonated outside the embassy in late March 1965, continued the recruiting and training program while GVN-controlled territory shrank even further. Washington endorsed continued expansion when the interagency covert action oversight group, known as the 303 Committee, approved it in July.⁴²

ARVN suffered catastrophic losses in May and June, losing almost 1,700 men in one week of June alone. In July, MACV rated five ARVN regiments and nine battalions as unfit for combat. Even in III Corps, composed of the provinces around Saigon, pacification operations were faltering despite relatively light communist military pressure. At the same time, in Quang Ngai Province, a visiting embassy officer found pacification to be “so far from everyone’s minds . . . that one hesitates even to ask . . . about it.” In midsummer 1965, the GVN had on its hands in Quang Ngai as many as 100,000 refugees, the product of floods, communist military activity, and U.S. and GVN artillery fire and airstrikes. Two battles at Ba Gia had claimed one ARVN battalion and half of another, and the communists had captured two 105 mm howitzers. The GVN had also lost sixty-two New Life Hamlets, constituting “at least half the terrain and people [over which it had previously exercised] tenuous control.” At night, the government owned only the district and province towns, plus a few military outposts, and all of these were within the 2,000-yard range of the VC’s 60 mm mortars.⁴³

The embassy visitor concluded that without a “massive input of friendly forces” the VC could overrun the remaining GVN enclaves whenever they chose to do so. With local morale, both Vietnamese and American, at rock bottom, “the only GVN element appearing almost completely reliable . . . is

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the 24 Political [*sic*] Action Teams comprising some 1,000 men and women. Throughout the sorry spectacle of the past two months their kill and weapons capture ratio has remained heavily in favor of the GVN. There has been only one deserter.” The teams were not, to be sure, performing their charter role of bringing a GVN presence into contested hamlets, because the district chiefs had to use them as the situation demanded—as “a sort of elite Popular Forces which can be counted upon to defend district towns and to patrol beyond the outskirts.”⁴⁴

The proven reliability of the PATs, coupled with their intimate familiarity with the terrain and people in II Corps, led to their use in conjunction with U.S. ground forces, particularly the U.S. Marines. In mid-August 1965, the work of one PAT led to the destruction of an entire communist regiment in Binh Son District of Quang Ngai Province. A member of the VC First Regiment, fearful of U.S. air strikes and aware of the PAT reputation for gentle handling of defectors, surrendered to a PAT element, which took him to district headquarters. The district chief turned him over to the Marines. Their debriefing produced intelligence which, collated with existing holdings, facilitated an assault that killed more than 600 enemy troops. Two more PATs were then deployed to the area to try to reclaim the civilian population, while other PAT personnel began serving as scouts and point men for U.S. Marine patrols. Ancillary benefits of this cooperation included reducing the accidental exchange of fire with neighboring ARVN units and suppressing communist harassing fire on Marine positions.⁴⁵

In the meantime, a less intense level of enemy military action, in the northern part of I Corps, was encountering heavier ARVN resistance, especially from the elite First Division in Quang Tri and Thua Thien provinces. The relatively low level of combat allowed PATs to pursue their pacification agenda, although the GVN position in Quang Tin, just north of gravely threatened Quang Ngai, was still declining. And pacification in all five provinces was complicated by partisan politics: one or another of the pre-World War II nationalist parties dominated in each of them, and continual friction between these secular parties and politically active Buddhists continually hampered the development of an even-handed program.

Buddhist Obstructionism and CIA Reengagement with the Montagnards

In September, the perennially touchy Buddhist leadership in Hue accused the Quang Tri province chief of using the PATs there as instruments of the Dai Viet

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Party. The provincial Buddhist association had reportedly warned its members against the PAT, and militant Buddhist monk Tri Quang alleged that the province chief was planning to use the team for political assassination. The stand-off continued for a month, at which point an officer from the U.S. Consulate at Hue saw some prospect of mutual accommodation. The province chief was about to leave, and "American control over the program [was] in any case being tightened."⁴⁶

Buddhist hostility to the programs erupted also in neighboring Thua Thien Province. Census-Grievance had just been established there, and the Buddhist chairman of the Hue Municipal Council assailed it, claiming that the peasants scorned the poorly qualified cadres and resented what they considered American-sponsored spying on them. The consulate officer listening to these complaints observed that they probably reflected no more than the growing pains of a new program. But he also picked up a theme already familiar to the station from its dealings with MACV, noting that the point about unqualified cadres illustrated the growing competition for qualified manpower. Decisions would soon have to be made, he thought, about priorities in recruiting for the "multitudinous military, paramilitary, and civilian programs competing for scarce . . . talent."⁴⁷

In Quang Nam Province, surrounding Da Nang, the new province chief seemed to understand neither the PAT mission nor his own role as supervisor. His antagonism toward the program brought him into conflict with the I Corps commander, Lieutenant General Nguyen Chanh Thi, who saw the PAT as constructive and valuable. Only in Quang Tin, of the five I Corps provinces, had a political balance been struck. There, although most of the PAT cadres belonged to the VNQDD Party, the provincial PAT Control Committee was evenly divided among the VNQDD, Dai Viets, and members with no party affiliation.⁴⁸

Meanwhile, the decay of CIDG and the mortal threat posed by communist military advances had brought the station back into an active role with the montagnards. Americans had run CIDG from the beginning—the GVN had never done more than monitor it—and MACV had replaced the station as a source of guidance to the U.S. Special Forces teams in the camps.

However understandable as a professional military reflex, MACV's preoccupation with tactical exploitation had led, as we have seen, to a neglect of the always-touchy relationships between the GVN and the various tribal leaders. Although Saigon's military government had abandoned the Diem regime's highlands settlement projects, so detested by the montagnards, the generals were no more interested than Diem had been in resolving tribal grievances.

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MACV's lack of interest in assuming the mediating role played by the station during its stewardship of CIDG meant that these grievances were left to fester. It also meant the end of the American role as counselor and confidant, and the Americans at Buon Eno received no hint of montagnard planning there for the revolt that erupted in September 1964. This war-within-a-war outraged Ambassador Taylor, who reproached General Westmoreland in Methven's presence for the failure of MACV's Special Forces to foresee and forestall the montagnard killing of some seventy Vietnamese soldiers at the camps.⁴⁹

Even more than the decline of CIDG, the deployment into the South of regular combat forces from North Vietnam impelled CIA back into work with the montagnards. The communist invasion targeted primarily the II Corps area, containing most of the tribal population, and threatened to slice South Vietnam in two. This prospect rendered academic the jurisdictional demarcation represented by Operation Switchback, and the operative question became whether any combination of American resources could save the day. In these circumstances, the agency's involvement in pacification in South Vietnam came full circle as it returned to substantial engagement with the montagnard minority.⁵⁰

As of mid-1964, the station had been supporting a total of only 200 montagnards, from the Rhadé and Mnong tribes, in Counter-Terror, Advance Political Action, and unspecified "resource control" activities. New circumstances required a new investment, and the station built a new training center at Pleiku, in Kontum Province, in April 1965. Exploiting the nominal sponsorship of the GVN Directorate of Montagnard Affairs, the station set out to form C-T, APA, and People's Action Teams in each of the twenty-one highland provinces.⁵¹

The new effort encountered the familiar obstacles. Repression of the montagnard revolt had been followed by nominal GVN concessions intended to dampen support for the rebels. In the station's view, GVN foot dragging was abetted by the slow delivery of the material aid promised by USOM. Accordingly, CIA used its new center not only for cadre training but as the locus of a broader, coordinated U.S. Mission effort to help the GVN reestablish itself with the montagnards. One feature of this was the improvement of GVN-montagnard communications, and to this end the station brokered the creation of a montagnard advisory panel to the GVN and supported the government's Directorate of Montagnard Affairs. It also sought to help provide tangible benefits to the highland population, supporting a montagnard vocational training school at Hue and the recruitment and training of civic and political action cadres.⁵²

These efforts did not eliminate the friction between the government and its

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tribal constituents. For one thing, station-supported teams seemed to share the increased reluctance of Rhadé tribesmen to fight fellow Rhadé who supported the VC. In addition, "several known autonomy agitators" at the training center had to be relieved. On the GVN side, II Corps commander Lieutenant General Vinh Loc seemed to Bill Colby "almost pathological in his hatred of the Montagnards and his distrust of the American role in the highlands." Defense Minister Nguyen Huu Co also doubted U.S. ability to control the montagnard forces it supported, but the Americans constituted the only communication with dissident leaders. In late July 1965 the GVN "reluctantly," according to Colby, asked the mission to continue its role as intermediary.⁵³

Another revolt broke out in December. Ten instructors at the Pleiku center were later arrested for complicity, but only after having demonstrated that the montagnards could conceal their planning from CIA contacts as well as from Special Forces advisers. The incident can only have strengthened perennial GVN suspicions of CIA partisanship on behalf of the montagnards. Nevertheless, the station's contacts on both sides allowed it to continue serving as honest broker, helping the embassy to pressure the GVN to accommodate at least some tribal interests. In so doing, the station helped preserve a grudging montagnard commitment to the GVN, one that sufficed to permit expanding paramilitary and social programs in the highlands.⁵⁴

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By the end of 1965, the Johnson administration had sent nearly 200,000 American troops to Vietnam. Together with GVN forces, some of which were fighting well, they had blunted the Viet Cong–North Vietnamese Army advance. It might be argued that at this point the question of pacification strategy had become moot, that escalation by Hanoi followed by a Washington response in kind had rendered rural political loyalties irrelevant, or at most tangential, to the outcome. But the communists had always relied heavily on peasant cooperation for manpower, materiel, and intelligence, and the introduction of North Vietnamese Army combat forces only increased the need for local support.¹

The accelerating casualties inflicted by superior U.S. firepower after mid-1965 forced Hanoi to take another look at its commitment to early victory. But the hard-liners prevailed, and the Twelfth Plenum of the Communist Party Central Committee, held in Hanoi in late December, made only a ritual bow to the “strategic formula” of “protracted war” while it reaffirmed the drive for “decisive victory during a relatively short period of time.”²

A substantial body of evidence suggests that the Southern peasants’ disposition to support this drive was fading even as U.S. forces slowed the North Vietnamese momentum in battles like the one in the Ia Drang valley in November 1965. Ground combat had also intensified in and near populated areas, and this reinforced a climate in which popular sentiment seems to have been shifting away from the insurgents. Except for a few “thoroughly indoctrinated revolutionaries,” nearly all of more than 200 VC defectors and prisoners inter-

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viewed for one study cited this trend, which they attributed not only to allied sweep operations and B-52 bombings but also to an easing of popular hostility toward the GVN. The study concluded that “memories of persecution or corruption by local officials during the Diem regime are fading, and the successor governments have been able to enforce somewhat better standards of behavior.”³

By these accounts, relatively benign GVN comportment and increasingly onerous exactions by the Viet Cong had launched this trend even before the conflict escalated with the commitment of North Vietnamese and then U.S. combat forces. The concerted effort to win voluntary cooperation that characterized the VC program during the nine years of Ngo Dinh Diem’s rule had largely given way, by late 1965, to a military draft and “strict, even abusive, discipline.” Many peasants, seeing the GVN as militarily stronger than the VC, wondered why ARVN commanders did not do more to reestablish a GVN presence in the villages rather than merely attack them for harboring VC guerrillas. Interviewers from the Rand Corporation saw the GVN’s failure to do more for refugees as abdicating an opportunity to exploit VC antagonism toward peasants who returned to their villages after fleeing into GVN territory. Furthermore, both uncommitted peasants and devoted VC activists were beginning to see the outcome as more likely to be determined by the struggle between Hanoi and the United States than by local Viet Cong resistance to the Saigon government. In localities where U.S. military power had extinguished the communist organization, the villagers seemed disposed to “accept U.S. ‘control’ as part of the price for peace.”⁴

None of this meant that the villages of the South had ripened for easy picking by a more enlightened GVN. Whether operating under the military protection of the North Vietnamese Army in Annam or relying on indigenous forces in the Delta, the Viet Cong civilian and military cadre structure was still intact, and could still hold most draftees in their units. Some deterioration of quality had occurred in the lower ranks, and the effectiveness of local National Liberation Front (NLF) chapters varied, but on the whole Viet Cong cadres remained “dedicated, well-disciplined, and able to preserve good morale.”⁵

The pervasiveness and tenacity of the VC organization were conspicuous only a few miles west of Saigon, in Hau Nghia Province. A late-1965 Defense Department study judged more than half the population there to be under VC control and 42 percent more as under communist “influence.” The authors attributed this dominance to VC exploitation of peasant grievances and kinship ties, supplemented where necessary by coercive measures. The CIA officer in Hau Nghia reportedly believed that nearly all the VC in the province were native to the area, and he considered them self-sufficient even in “grenades and

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other weapons.” Not every province experienced the same level of VC influence, but Hau Nghia was not unique or even unusual. There, as in provinces such as Long An in the Delta and Binh Dinh in Annam, the task was not so much to resist an insurgent threat to Saigon’s authority as it was to replace Viet Cong rule with that of the GVN. In these places, nothing had changed since 1955, when Paul Harwood and Ed Lansdale had struggled with the same balance—or imbalance—of forces.⁶

A Finger in the Dike

The prospect of complete GVN collapse tended to focus managerial attention on short-term results. Counter-Terror, more than the station’s other programs, offered the promise of an immediate and quantifiable product. Accordingly, the station devised new operational ploys to take the war to the enemy and to discredit the VC with the villagers.

In some instances, such schemes resulted in visible if not necessarily permanent effects. In Quang Tin Province, in November 1964, twenty five-man C-T teams infiltrated a VC-dominated coastal area under the protection of an ARVN sweep operation. Staying behind after the sweep, the teams attacked VC emerging from cover; they later reported killing eighty-three in the ensuing week with no C-T losses. In the next three weeks, up to the date of the station report, the VC created no security incidents, in contrast with the previous September, when they had instigated twenty.⁷

The Quang Tin C-T element aggressively pursued known VC cadres, and sometimes maneuvered the VC into punishing their own. Presumably exploiting the knowledge of ex-VC cadres on the team, one unit sent a member posing as a VC courier to the home of a communist village chief. Leading him to the edge of the village on some pretext, the C-T killed him, and subsequent reporting from that locality indicated that the official’s widow held communist elements to be responsible. In a more imaginative ploy, also in Quang Tin, a C-T element mounted guard over the house of the known VC district chief. Letting it be known that they had been sent to protect a valuable GVN ally, they remained for three days. When the VC official later returned, he was met by a “committee of VC who executed him.” Some Quang Tin C-T activity was designed primarily for its psychological effect: one team hoisted a booby-trapped GVN flag over the house of a known VC guerrilla, and two VC were wounded taking it down. On 19 May, a C-T element set up a Ho Chi Minh scarecrow, in mock honor of the communist leader’s birthday, at the local market, where it remained untouched for the day.⁸

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Some C-T operations had intelligence as their goal. In Kien Tuong Province, home to the insurgent safe haven in the Plain of Reeds, a C-T group posing as VC tax collectors acquired detailed information on VC intelligence collection techniques and requirements, and on popular reaction to communist exactions. Unwary VC agents and sympathizers revealed themselves, including a woman who claimed immunity from Viet Cong taxes because as the mistress of a GVN district chief she was supplying important information. C-T teams in Kien Tuong, like similar elements elsewhere, used intelligence from other station programs, in one case raiding a VC armory and a medical aid station, capturing seven VC.⁹

Operations like the raid on the Kien Tuong armory should have been routine for well-led elements of ARVN, or even of local units like the Regional and Popular Forces, and there must have been units that undertook them, with equivalent results. Be that as it may, a shortage persisted of attack-oriented assets available to the GVN's local pacification authority, the province chief. This often led to deployment on conventional missions, which were not, of course, necessarily less efficacious for having departed from the prescribed C-T mission against the political infrastructure. Another such conventional mission, an exceptionally productive one, took place in November in Chau Doc Province. A half dozen PF militiamen led thirty-six C-T cadres to the site of a VC camp along a canal. In the ensuing raid, the C-T party killed fifteen VC, including a district company commander and a district political commissar. The GVN team suffered only two killed and one wounded.¹⁰

No one claimed that these activities, or even pacification operations as a whole, had turned the balance in favor of the GVN. But in September 1965, Bill Colby called the DCI's attention to evidence of concern in the Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN)—the Lao Dong Party Central Committee element in the South—over black C-T operations. A captured document said that COSVN had warned subordinate Viet Cong elements earlier in the year about the “‘enemy’ practice of posing as Viet Cong troops to extract contributions of financial aid for the ‘Liberation Army.’” The document complained about two tactics, one involving robbery of passengers traveling rural roads and the other employing counterfeit liberation tax receipts to acknowledge money that the ostensible Viet Cong extorted from the villagers. Colby's memorandum to the DCI and to officials at State and the White House attributed these operations to the Chuong Thien Province C-T team, and interpreted the captured document as an indication of the “enemy's concern over the disruptive effects” of the C-T program.¹¹

As the end of 1965 approached, the station produced a statistical sum-

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mary of its cadre operations and their results. Nearly 15,000 cadresmen—and women—had been deployed as of 30 September, including 8,700 in PATs and 3,700 in APA teams. C-T teams had 1,900 members and Census-Grievance, just beginning its expansion into a national program, had 500. The annual station budget for the programs stood at \$28 million.¹²

In the first nine months of 1965, Census-Grievance cadres had conducted 350,000 interviews, while PAT and APA medics had seen almost 200,000 patients. PAT and APA teams had built and repaired roads, bridges, and fences; dug 472 wells; and devoted a major share of their effort to assisting the needy. The station reported that the results of these endeavors included 5,300 VC newly identified, more than 3,000 recruits for the GVN armed forces, 430 VC induced to rally to the GVN, and 4,800 families persuaded to move voluntarily into New Life Hamlets. In the campaign against Viet Cong civilian and military elements, station-supported teams accounted for more than 3,100 VC killed and wounded, with 780 captured, along with some 300 weapons. Combined operations with other GVN forces produced another 1,700 casualties and recovered almost 200 weapons. Other GVN military activity, based on intelligence from cadre operations, produced almost 2,500 casualties and nearly 1,000 prisoners, and netted more than 300 weapons.¹³

An Early Taste of Discretionary Authority

At least until the massive U.S. commitment of combat forces stemmed communist military advances in late 1965, CIA case officers residing in the provinces worked in circumstances ranging from difficult to desperate. These circumstances created a camaraderie in Tom Donohue's Political Action Section that one of his junior officers, John O'Reilly, later recalled having been enhanced by the case officer's autonomy as an agency provincial representative. O'Reilly said he had more discretionary authority as a first-tour GS-08 than he ever again enjoyed in a career that he ended as an SIS-3, the protocol equivalent of a major general. This autonomy gave him considerable if informal leverage on the GVN in the form of the arms, equipment, training, and money that CIA could supply on short notice, but which he had no obligation to dispense until he was satisfied they would be used for agreed purposes.¹⁴

Management set the tone with an egalitarian style that O'Reilly recalled being practiced not just by Donohue and his Saigon assistants but by COS Jorgensen as well. Several of the junior officers threw a party one night, and Jorgensen came. Expected to make no more than a pro forma appearance, he surprised his hosts by falling in love with an O'Reilly record of military

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marches, playing it over and over. Some of the guests finally gave in to fatigue, and reluctantly infringed protocol by taking their leave. Jorgensen didn't notice—O'Reilly was sure he wouldn't have cared—and eventually got ready to go. Forgetting he had given his driver the evening off, he climbed into the back seat of his car. With his hosts looking on in some discomfiture, he emerged, calmly got in again, this time behind the wheel, and drove off.¹⁵

Like O'Reilly, nearly all the other new province case officers were serving their first tour abroad, and like O'Reilly, nearly all of them, during this period, rose to the challenge with an admirable display of imagination, energy, and professional discipline. There were a few miscues, among them the experience of a young officer assigned to Chau Doc in the lower Delta. Unable to be present on a given cadre payday, he asked a U.S. Special Forces sergeant there to handle it for him. Having returned from his errand in Saigon, the officer asked for the promised accounting. He had apparently not specified the form this should take, for the sergeant led him to a hut containing a heap of coconuts and explained that he had required each payee to deposit a coconut. In this way, the sergeant had intended to ensure that the total number of payees did not exceed the number on the roster. But he had seen no need for other documentation, and the hapless case officer had some difficulty getting the station's finance section to approve the transaction.¹⁶

By late 1965, with a complement of young case officers supervising the expansion of the Kien Hoa and Quang Ngai initiatives into the rest of South Vietnam, the CIA action programs had acquired the form that they retained until the agency began to withdraw from them in 1969. Decentralized management meant continued local adaptation, but with program substance now more or less determined, three other questions came to the fore.

The first of these concerned the interagency aspect of program management. Before the beginning of 1966, it was already clear that expanded programs required better coordination on the U.S. side in order to ensure the coherent deployment of American advisory services and material resources, both civilian and military. It was clear also that the informal system of provincial franchises, as John O'Reilly called them, would not suffice as the basis for a national effort. Such an effort would require active GVN participation, even while it remained under *de facto* U.S. management, and would demand an unreserved GVN commitment if the programs were to survive when the Saigon government eventually assumed full responsibility.¹⁷

The second question asked whether the action programs could expand to a level permitting them to make a decisive contribution, and whether they could do this without sacrificing quality. All of them had arisen in response to the

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inadequacy of regular GVN institutions, and it remained to be seen whether they could provide the core of a new rural administration without succumbing to the bureaucratic lassitude they were designed to circumvent.

The last question was that of intelligence. Growing recognition of the need for more information on the Viet Cong and for better processing of the intelligence product had not been matched by the creation of effective collection and collation programs. In a few places, notably Kien Hoa, GVN officials and their American advisers all emphasized intelligence, but most provinces conducted no centralized program of collection, collation, and distribution of information on the communist political organization, the VCI. Bad enough on the U.S. side, bureaucratic compartmentation hindered Vietnamese intelligence collection and distribution even more. The rest of the story of American involvement in rural pacification in Vietnam describes the ways in which U.S. officials and their GVN counterparts dealt with these issues.¹⁸

The Contest for Counterinsurgency Primacy

During the post-Diem period of revolving-door government in Saigon, agency liaison at the provincial level encouraged local initiatives and facilitated prompt logistic support for ideas that looked promising. The infusion of CIA resources at provincial level gave the station real influence on Vietnamese performance, and quick feedback on problems and results allowed adjustments at a speed impossible in programs administered at the national level. Local program direction also encouraged the experimentation that led, in some places, to the integration of security and intelligence operations with social and economic aid efforts. The synergistic effect of this approach accounts for the successes of the PATs and the smaller APA and C-G units in persuading villagers that it was both desirable and practicable to commit themselves to the GVN.

But decentralized management also meant that the quality of the programs in individual provinces varied according to the commitment, competence, and tenure of GVN officials and their agency advisers. It varied also with the degree of mutual confidence and communication between provincial officials and the advisers. The incremental approach to expansion limited the pace of program growth, and while it preserved flexibility, the emphasis on local solutions to local problems sometimes led to the appearance of weak control, both American and GVN, from Saigon. Furthermore, the absence until late 1965 of formal GVN sponsorship deprived the programs of active GVN support for such requirements as military draft deferment or exemption for cadre personnel. Decentralization also prevented the GVN from exploiting, if it had a mind to

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do so, the potential for grassroots political organization that COS Jorgensen thought the provincial programs contained. Finally, the franchise approach encouraged the Vietnamese affected by the programs to see them as unilateral instruments of the CIA. The reaction to them by the Quang Tri Buddhists, recounted above, was unusual in its hostility, but not in its focus on the agency role.¹⁹

In addition to the de facto exclusion of the national government, the decentralization that accounted for the programs' virtues also made them vulnerable to misunderstanding and bureaucratic competition. The selection of programs varied from province to province, and so did the implementation of any given program. Although the station strove for as much uniformity as local circumstances allowed, the autonomy of the field case officer and his Vietnamese counterparts meant that Advance Political Action might emphasize proselytizing in VC-influenced hamlets in one province and collecting intelligence on the Viet Cong in another. Such variations inevitably led to the appearance of incoherence, especially to observers disposed to be skeptical. This, in turn, militated against fruitful application of the station's experience to the pacification planning of other U.S. Mission elements.²⁰

Whatever the merits of province-level management, the very fact of agency sponsorship invited the kind of sensationalist press coverage—Vietnamese as well as American—that could only distract attention from evaluating them by their results. This sponsorship was a matter of public knowledge, but the agency declined to acknowledge it. The press in both countries eagerly accepted this challenge with exposés, factual or fabricated, of the CIA role. COS Gordon Jorgensen anticipated that the GVN would propose to cut the Gordian knot by acknowledging CIA support to cadre operations other than Counter-Terror, but headquarters ordered him to cut this off, replying that “we do not wish to open the door, even a crack, on the element of press exposure. We do not wish to explain or justify publicly our participation in any program and [a mission statement acknowledging it] might well leave us open to this.”²¹

The station's goal-oriented style did not, in any case, assign a high priority to public relations or bureaucratic maneuvering; the dominant if implicit assumption was that results would in fact speak for themselves. Even so, Tom Donohue worried about an October 1965 request from Lieutenant General Lewis Walt, commanding the III Marine Amphibious Force, for a CIA briefing in Da Nang for Senator Daniel Brewster (D-MD). COS Jorgensen did not agree that the rough-hewn style of the station's representative there, Robert Haynes, created any serious risk of embarrassment, and he declined Donohue's offer to fly to Da Nang to handle the briefing.²²

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As it turned out, General Walt's staff did not honor Haynes's request for limited attendance at the briefing, which took place in an adversarial atmosphere. Brewster began by stating his reservations about the CIA program in Vietnam. Apparently persuaded that the station was pursuing an uncoordinated agenda, he accused it of "muddying up the water" in Vietnam. He conducted a detailed interrogation on the structure and activity of each program, and this led Haynes, in the context of Counter-Terror, into a mention of black operations. Pressured to define the term, Haynes cited as a hypothetical example a killing by a C-T team made to look like the work of the VC.²³

In the ensuing flurry of attention from Capitol Hill, Haynes was summoned to Washington to explain himself, and presidential adviser Clark Clifford, visiting Saigon in November, dryly suggested to COS Jorgensen that he allow no further congressional briefings by his subordinates. Headquarters agreed with the station that "unfounded comment" by Senator Brewster and two of his colleagues "misrepresents C-T operations," but went on to note that these operations were in fact of an "extra-legal nature." Accordingly, headquarters called for a GVN approval procedure whose application at the province level would allow the agency to say "in good conscience" that the government had approved each operation as "in the best interest of the war effort."²⁴

The experience with Senator Brewster illustrated one of the agency's perennial problems with both legislators and other departments in the executive branch. Both would often disavow or withhold in one context the approval of agency work that they voiced in another. Brewster had gone to Da Nang from Saigon, where he had asked the embassy about the station's rural operations. Ambassador Lodge had been carefully noncommittal, disclaiming any detailed knowledge of them. But only six days later, in a draft letter to President Johnson that he showed to Jorgensen, the ambassador thought he knew enough about these activities to say that they "were going to have to play a very vital role" in the pacification campaign.²⁵

Interagency tension could arise at the local level as well. In late 1965, not every province had a resident CIA case officer, and a few officers were still supervising operations in two or three. But the agency's pacification programs now served in many provinces as the de facto basis for the entire effort, led by the province chief, to reclaim civilian communities loyal to or influenced by the Viet Cong. Prospects for achieving this goal rested on the active cooperation not only of the province and district chiefs but also of the local MACV advisory team, whose size and status as the agent of the U.S. military aid program made it the dominant American presence at the provincial level. In most cases, a sense of common interest overcame any inhibition the U.S. military

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felt about working with CIA's civilians, and the station's collegial dealings with the MACV team in Kien Hoa were often repeated elsewhere. Where this spirit was lacking, the outmanned CIA representation found itself struggling to make any progress.

To these professional obstacles could be added, on the military side, severe damage to the career of an officer seen as too cooperative with his CIA counterpart. IV Corps adviser Colonel Jasper Wilson's intense aversion to an agency role in pacification led him to proscribe any provincial assistance to agency officers. As early as the spring of 1965, he had sent home at least one sector adviser for having cooperated with CIA; I was present, once, when he suddenly arrived in Long An, and the well-disposed but terrified sector adviser actually hid me until Wilson left. Initial station efforts through Generals DePuy and Stilwell got no corrective action, and COS De Silva, urged on by Political Action Section chief Donohue, had to approach Westmoreland directly to get Wilson's ukase withdrawn. Despite Westmoreland's endorsement of the liaison, collaboration in the Delta remained uneasy for the rest of Wilson's tour. The syndrome occasionally recurred, though in less virulent form, among senior MACV advisers who saw the Vietnamese conflict as an entirely military enterprise, one whose conduct the intervention of ignorant if well-intentioned civilians could only impede.²⁶

Leadership by Example

Despite Westmoreland's reserve and the paucity of bureaucratic leverage resulting from the station's modest position in the mission pecking order, the practical successes of CIA's approach to pacification began to make converts among erstwhile skeptics. As we have seen, the first of these was Henry Cabot Lodge, who had returned for a second tour as ambassador in August 1965. Always susceptible to intense if unfocused enthusiasms, Lodge let his sudden passion for rural pacification and the evidence of station leadership in this field overcome his earlier doubts about agency responsiveness to his direction. One influence on ambassadorial attitudes was probably Major General Edward Lansdale, whom Lodge had brought with him as his pacification adviser. Although no longer associated with the agency, Lansdale seems to have recognized the legacy of his earlier work when he endorsed the station's current programs.²⁷

Even in the insular climate at MACV Headquarters, not everyone saw the agency's approach as irrelevant or distracting. Brigadier General William DePuy, Westmoreland's J-3, had in early 1965 already recognized the GVN's failure to capture the psychological initiative in the competition for peasant

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loyalty. His reservations about a leading CIA role in pacification apparently faded as he watched the performance of PATs in II Corps and Quang Ngai Province. In September, he wrote to General Westmoreland proposing to recognize the PAT as the psychological and political adjunct to the U.S. military operations now enjoying considerable success.²⁸

This followed conversations with Gordon Jorgensen, who as COS had substituted a more collegial style for Peer De Silva's confrontational approach to MACV. DePuy told the COS that he judged military organizations—presumably Vietnamese as well as American—to be incapable of grasping the essentially civilian nature of counterinsurgency. Probably aware of the close liaison at the provincial level between CIA officers and units of General Walt's Marine Amphibious Force, DePuy called for better communication between MACV's field commanders and the CIA and GVN officials running pacification operations in the provinces.²⁹

In Washington that October, General DePuy reaffirmed his endorsement of the PAT, but noted the destructive potential of competition among U.S. programs for Vietnamese manpower. He noted the attractiveness of station-supported programs to potential recruits who, unlike many on GVN payrolls, would be able to count on getting all their pay, and getting it on time. DePuy worried that the staffing of equally essential GVN programs might suffer as a result.³⁰

Headquarters, for its part, worried that DePuy's reservations might represent a veiled threat to oppose a program allegedly uncoordinated with other U.S. Mission requirements. Colby's deputy noted the potential for confusion created by local variations in team format and mission. He urged Jorgensen first to refine the mission statement for each program and then to solicit formal Mission Council endorsement of the entire package.³¹

Anxiety at headquarters was not matched in Saigon. Favorable MACV reviews for the station programs were accompanied by increased interest on the part of the GVN and the military junta, now variously known as the Directory or the National Leadership Committee. The generals had in June dispensed with the facade of civilian government when they dumped civilian prime minister Phan Huy Quat. Directory chief General Nguyen Van Thieu now served also in the ceremonial position of head of state, while Air Vice Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky had been named prime minister.³²

In September, Thieu had invited Jorgensen and Donohue to discuss both the GVN and the U.S. aspects of program sponsorship. The COS stated his desire both to maintain and to conceal a CIA supervisory role at provincial level. Undeterred by these conditions, Thieu asked if training capacity could

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be doubled, and Jorgensen offered the prospect of increasing by 400 per cycle until classes reached 4,000 each by mid-1966. Another Directory member, Pham Xuan Chieu, endorsed the station's programs as an effort to do what everyone had always acknowledged as a necessity but no one had ever seriously tried.³³

The generals seemed favorably impressed by the small and inconspicuous American presence in the station programs, and they also appeared to recognize that CIA saw the development of indigenous leadership as a prerequisite to success. More to the point, perhaps, was their fear of being unprepared for a negotiated settlement achieved by the force of U.S. arms. Suggesting that they saw this as an imminent possibility (although "with no explanation of how that point is to be reached"), they treated the station's various teams as a means of blocking the renewed infiltration, subversion, and political organization they expected to follow a settlement with Hanoi.³⁴

The unanimity with which the Directory adopted the station's programs disappeared when the subject turned to the locus of GVN control. General Thieu wanted station-supported cadres to become National Police auxiliaries, while Prime Minister Ky advocated housing the entire effort—he probably meant to exclude Counter-Terror—in the Ministry of Rural Construction. Jorgensen suggested a compromise in the form of an interministerial committee charged with policy and general supervision. Appended to this would be a "small, inconspicuous control group" of station and GVN officials that would continue essentially the same joint oversight then being conducted by the station and the Interior Ministry. Whatever the locus of Saigon's control, Jorgensen told the Vietnamese, management "in a decentralized fashion at the provincial level would continue to be mandatory if the objectives were to be accomplished."³⁵

Prime Minister Ky prevailed, probably because he devoted more attention and energy to the subject than did Thieu, and the Rural Construction Ministry became the programs' new home. Jorgensen was at first uneasy over this, partly because of doubts about the prime minister's competence, but Ky immediately seized the initiative. With the signing of Decree No. 1900 UBHB-CT on 5 November, he adopted the station's programs as the GVN's own instrument of rural pacification.³⁶

Two weeks later, Ambassador Lodge wrote to the DCI, Admiral William Raborn, asking the agency to increase its commitment of men and materiel to meet the new requirement. With the Ministry of Rural Construction taking on GVN supervision of the programs, Lodge saw USOM as the logical candidate to assume the burden of American support. But this would take time. Mean-

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while, the agency should bear the main responsibility, and Lodge told the DCI he hoped that “in a matter of such immediate and long-range consequence to the U.S. Government, Washington would find some way of providing [CIA] with the extra resources you need. . . . If this message will assist you in securing these resources, please feel free to use it.”³⁷

Lodge said nothing about melding CIA programs into a comprehensive strategy integrating all military and civilian efforts in the countryside. Despite its growing impatience with fragmented management in Saigon, the Johnson administration also lacked a plan. National Security Adviser Bundy conceded to the president in December 1965 that the United States “did not have a complete and fully developed political, economic, and social program to match the major new military deployments proposed for 1966.”³⁸

Managerial Friction in the Ministry

Like all the other U.S. entities involved in the war effort, both the station—where all the operational innovations originated—and the agency as a whole had failed to articulate a doctrine of rural pacification or a comprehensive plan for South Vietnam. The local successes of CIA’s post-Diem programs and their apparent potential for expansion and refinement discouraged, in effect, both a rigorous analysis of the insurgency and a calculation of the means required to defeat it. The station’s main concerns, after Ky’s November decree, were to consolidate GVN sponsorship for its activities while maintaining independent provincial contacts, and to preserve its autonomy within the U.S. Mission while eliciting the voluntary participation of other agencies.³⁹

This delicate task was greatly facilitated by Ky’s choice of a new minister of Rural Development. Major General Nguyen Duc Thang proved to be an energetic, pragmatic officer whose emphasis on action over the niceties of protocol paralleled the station’s approach. In October, Thang spent more than three weeks with station officers, inspecting the Vung Tau training facilities and visiting various operations in the provinces. At a meeting with Jorgensen and Donohue on 1 November, Thang endorsed the agency presence in the provinces, and stated his intention to use the station’s work as the core of the national program. He wanted assurances of full material backing for at least two years, including air transport, the Vung Tau training center, plus cadre payroll, weapons, and supplies.⁴⁰

General Thang hoped that, within two or three years, the GVN could run the programs by itself. But he made it explicit to the station, in a “personal judgment which he could not express officially,” that immediate GVN assump-

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Ministry of Revolutionary Development, c. 1968. The literal translation from the Vietnamese is the more anodyne “Ministry of Rural Construction.”

tion of control would destroy them. Thang claimed Ky’s support for his position, and COS Jorgensen told headquarters that Generals Thieu and Chieu were also on board. He added that he hoped he could assure both Thang and the U.S. Mission Council that the agency was prepared to honor the GVN request.⁴¹

For all his energy and goodwill, Thang needed help, and in an early talk with Tom Donohue asked for a candidate to head the GVN side of the cadre programs. Donohue immediately suggested Tran Ngoc Chau, still serving as chief of Kien Hoa Province, to head Thang’s Cadre Division.⁴²

Chau accepted the assignment. Clearly hoping to convert his own pacification formula into ministry doctrine, he prepared an encyclopedic two-volume pacification plan before moving to the ministry in December 1965. The document reflected his view that any victory achieved solely by military means would come about on devastated territory, breeding new dissidents who would launch the next war of liberation. Continuing the approach Chau had taken in Kien Hoa, the plan rested on the perceived imperative to base programs on

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a deep understanding of the Viet Cong and of the peasant mentality. Census-Grievance was to serve as the principal means to this end, supplemented by a hamlet-level community self-defense force trained in civic action, intelligence, and political proselyting.⁴³

Forwarding a copy of the plan to Deputy Director for Plans (DDP) Desmond FitzGerald, Bill Colby commented on Chau's apparent reservations about the U.S. advisory role. Despite Chau's consistently cordial relationship with the station and other U.S. advisers in Kien Hoa, his proposal implied that the numbers of American advisers sometimes outstripped their quality, and that they could not always accomplish their part of joint plans. This cloud on the horizon notwithstanding, Colby predicted a productive tour of duty for Chau at the ministry.⁴⁴

As it turned out, Chau found Thang entirely uncomprehending of the political and psychological aspects of pacification. In Chau's unsparing opinion, Thang naively equated the volume of benefits bestowed—classrooms constructed, bags of fertilizer distributed, etc.—with progress in winning peasant loyalty. Whether this judgment was entirely fair to Thang is not clear. Chau had grown accustomed to full autonomy as a pacification theorist and manager, and he cannot have found it easy to begin taking direction from a new boss inexperienced in matters on which he considered himself the preeminent authority. From another perspective, Tom Donohue thought that the fiercely independent Chau, having left his Kien Hoa fiefdom, might now be sensitive to the appearance of being just another of the junta's apparatchiks. Whatever its causes, the tension precluded a reciprocally supportive working relationship.⁴⁵

A Jurisdictional Tangle

Meanwhile, as administration pressure grew for a bigger and better-managed pacification effort, Bill Colby found himself reminded of the agony of Operation Switchback. Uneasy at the prospect of long-term CIA responsibility for a massively larger set of programs, and perhaps regretting his success in popularizing the PAT concept with policy makers, he wrote COS Jorgensen in mid-November that "the basic intelligence mission . . . is viewed as CIA's first priority by highest [i.e., presidential] levels here." Furthermore, CIA lacked the money to fund the programs even at the currently authorized rate. Headquarters was looking for more resources, either from other agencies or from a supplemental appropriation; it was also considering giving away parts of the programs, presumably to USOM.⁴⁶

In his message to Jorgensen, Colby summarized the station's pacification

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manpower projections: PATs alone were to employ 32,500 people by July 1966, and 54,000 a year later. With CIDG and Operation Switchback clearly in mind, Colby worried not only about money but about the station's ability to manage an activity on that scale and to cope with the publicity that any supervisory slipups might provoke. Accordingly, he thought it might be better to cap the programs at 25,000 to 30,000 cadres. Finessing the question of the size required to affect the ultimate outcome, he said, "we are seeking the optimum in terms of enough PAT effort to make a realistic impact on the situation but not so large as to lead to management and other problems which can frustrate the effort."⁴⁷

Jorgensen reacted impatiently to this effort to square the circle: "A transfer of responsibility . . . to the U.S. military will save Agency money but will not save the program." He cited General DePuy's view that, under military control, the program would degenerate into "a fairly simple combination of local paramilitary and civic action." And military advisers would inevitably favor combat forces over pacification teams, resulting in inadequate priorities for the politically oriented pacification program. Like Colby, Jorgensen chose not to estimate the size of a decisively effective program, but he left no doubt that 30,000 cadres would be too few.⁴⁸

The COS acknowledged the shortage of case officers to run the programs, but he insisted that an occasional embarrassment was simply the price of doing business. He noted that the U.S. military had just bombed the off-limits demilitarized zone for the third time, inflicting casualties among civilians and GVN police, and that the annual desertion rate in MACV's client military establishment was running at 285,000 out of a total of 573,000. "Let's proceed with confidence, admit our shortcomings, but keep steady on course." In any case, having sold its programs to Ambassador Lodge and the GVN, the agency could not now back out without looking like a refuge for "summer soldiers."⁴⁹

Colby must have looked for a way out of his dilemma by suggesting that station-supported pacification efforts be confined to areas protected by U.S. ground forces, for Jorgensen argued two days later that the GVN would find it "politically suicidal" to confine pacification to the relatively few areas enjoying a full-time American military shield. Such a policy, the COS thought, would also doom the prospects for successful U.S. and ARVN military operations against the communists' regular forces.⁵⁰

Jorgensen's position won the influential if tentative support of Robert McNamara toward the end of the defense secretary's visit in late November. After five hours of MACV briefings on the 28th, McNamara commented that he had found the pacification segment the most discouraging. The only men-

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tion of the station's work during this session had come in an unannounced presentation by the U.S. Marines. This account of Marine pacification efforts emphasized the collapse of a PAT in the Da Nang area which, as Jorgensen noted for headquarters, was one of two that had received only local training and had in fact been deactivated.⁵¹

Not until the next day did Jorgensen and his allies in the embassy and USOM find an opportunity to direct McNamara's attention to the station's programs. Instantly converted, it seems, McNamara volunteered an unqualified commitment to support the required levels of Vietnamese manpower. Deputy Ambassador William Porter inquired if this meant only military manpower or included civilian requirements like the police and the PAT program, and McNamara replied without hesitation that he meant both.⁵²

But it was clear that the defense secretary still had little understanding of the station's programs. Ambassador Porter undertook to fill this lacuna in a session with Lodge and McNamara at which he gave the secretary a report of a PAT action in Binh Dinh Province. The PAT had set up a village defense system there, with a twenty-eight-man volunteer militia supported by two intelligence and warning "platoons," one composed of women for daytime work and the other of elderly men for the night watch.⁵³

Porter offered this as a sample of PAT and Census-Grievance potential to mobilize the villagers. He told McNamara he thought the programs to be on the edge of a significant breakthrough. Already having second thoughts, the secretary responded skeptically, saying he welcomed the initiative and hoped it would succeed, but thought the history of failure in this area required some caution. Ambassador Lodge expressed no such reserve, telling Jorgensen separately that he was incorporating in his weekly report to the president two assurances from General Thang. The first asserted that one quarter of South Vietnam's 2,645 villages were already "close to pacification," and elections could be held in these villages without fear of VC intimidation. The second predicted that within two years, half of the country's villages would meet the same criterion.⁵⁴

Lodge assured the COS that McNamara had left with a better understanding of the agency's programs, and repeated his own endorsement. He said he was tired of listening to arguments about the propriety of agency involvement in pacification. The fact of the matter, he continued, was that to its considerable credit, the station had developed the only programs offering a prospect of success, and no further justification could reasonably be demanded.⁵⁵

Lodge adverted to his recent noncommittal response to Senator Brewster's question about agency rural operations. He insisted to the COS that only since,

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with visits to Vung Tau and to PAT operations in the field and with GVN adoption of the programs, had he come to understand their potential. Reporting this to headquarters on the eve of an interagency conference on pacification, Jorgensen noted that the meeting might well see efforts—presumably by the military—to derail Lodge's intention to establish station and USOM primacy in pacification matters.⁵⁶

Another potential rival for a role in pacification management came from within the embassy. In addition to MACV's evident desire for a formal coordinating role in Saigon, a longtime Lansdale associate, Charles T. R. Bohannon, was busy trying to enlist USOM and MACV support for transfer of control to Lansdale's office in the embassy. Lansdale had assured Jorgensen that the free-wheeling Bohannon was pursuing an entirely personal agenda, and the COS was left wondering why he could not be controlled. Jorgensen took the precaution of telling one GVN official—it may have been Thang—whom he knew to be in touch with Lansdale's office that any uncoordinated tinkering with program substance or managerial arrangements risked the cancellation of CIA support.⁵⁷

The turf war continued. In late December, Lodge gave Lansdale instructions that seem to have conferred more authority than the ambassador had earlier granted him. Westmoreland protested that he had not been consulted, and Charles Mann, heading USOM, claimed a legal responsibility to retain executive authority over the economic aid program. The station's ox seems not to have been gored in this episode, as Jorgensen expressed no concern for the preservation of the station's equities. In any case, while proprietary feelings or bureaucratic ambition may have affected to some degree all of the contenders for managerial primacy, all except probably Bohannon had substantive reasons, not mere pretexts, for wanting a share of it. Even MACV, making an otherwise essentially jurisdictional case, had a legitimate interest in the rational allocation of limited Vietnamese manpower.⁵⁸

The Territorial Imperative

The interagency meeting at which Jorgensen anticipated military efforts to claim pacification primacy took place just outside Washington in January 1966. The event reflected Washington's frustration with the failure of all efforts, in both Saigon and Washington, to come up with either a coherent strategy or a concrete plan for pacification management. Accordingly, Deputy Ambassador William Porter and the key members of the Mission Council spent three days with their Washington counterparts, wrestling with the weaknesses of Wash-

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ington policy making and Saigon's implementation of it. The Saigon participants saw policy guidelines from Washington as, in Chester Cooper's words, "much too broad, frequently platitudinous, and sometimes mutually inconsistent." As for control in Saigon, the participants judged Lodge's "watered-down version" of the Mission Council an even less useful management tool than it had been under Ambassador Taylor.⁵⁹

The conferees all endorsed better mission coordination, but they also wanted to preserve the autonomy of their respective agencies. This concern had the inevitable result of preventing agreement on an authority capable of transforming the desired coordination from an aspiration into a fact. The participants worried also about a massive American establishment taking over what should remain an advisory effort, but having failed to arrive at a clearly defined U.S. role, they settled for an exhortation to the mission to assure GVN responsibility for pacification activity.⁶⁰

The GVN, at this point, looked considerably more resolute than its American patrons as it followed through with the adoption of the CIA programs—and elements of USOM's rural program as well—signaled by Ky's November decree. On 26 January 1966, the GVN assumed formal sponsorship of 14,500 CIA cadres, 4,500 USOM-supported cadres assigned to New Life Hamlets, and the agency training center at Vung Tau. In so doing, it brought the station and USOM into de facto joint administration of U.S. support to cadre training.⁶¹

There existed, at this point, no accepted Vietnamese equivalent for the labels PAT and APA, and the programs adopted by the GVN still needed a name. More basically, they needed a strategic concept congenial to the GVN. President Johnson undertook to supply this when he invited Air Vice Marshal Ky and General Thieu to meet him in Honolulu in early February 1966. There, Johnson pursued the "other war" theme he had adopted at least partly in reaction to growing U.S. popular opposition to the escalating but always inconclusive violence in Vietnam. Asserting the importance of social and economic reforms as a weapon against the insurgents, Johnson urged the Vietnamese leadership to compete for "hearts and minds" in the Vietnamese countryside. Vice President Hubert Humphrey, visiting Saigon later in the month, echoed Johnson's call for a program of "revolutionary transformation." Ambassador Lodge thought Premier Ky had been "inspired" by this rhetoric, and he suggested that Ky "make clear to the world [his] devotion to the ideals of the Honolulu Conference" by renaming the cadre program Revolutionary Development (RD).⁶²

Ky readily accepted the term as the official English-language nomencla-

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ture, but declined to use its literal translation as the program's Vietnamese title. Instead, he extended to the CIA-sponsored teams the anodyne Vietnamese term for Rural Construction formerly applied only to cadres employed by the ministry. An embassy observer thought he understood why: "Vietnamese officials do not visualize the program as essentially revolutionary," but as an "opportunity for economic development and a channel for the injection of large quantities of American aid."⁶³

Not all the Honolulu sessions were bilateral, and at a meeting of U.S. officials, National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy pressured Lodge into naming Porter his "field commander for pacification." Johnson followed in March with the appointment of Robert Komer to oversee the Washington end of U.S. pacification support. But American command lines in the Saigon Mission did not change, and the enthusiasm for expanded rural pacification expressed by Ambassador Lodge did not lead to real authority for Porter.⁶⁴

Indeed, Porter had little taste for the role of pacification czar. As a matter of both temperament and conviction, he thought a more collegial approach sufficient to ensure adequate coordination. In his view, the station was doing a good job, and while he wanted more USOM participation, he doubted USAID's capacity ever to staff and supervise the effort. CIA should therefore, he argued, continue to play the leading role. This preference was reinforced, in effect, by Ambassador Lodge's disinclination to give his deputy the discretionary authority that Komer thought he should have. Indeed, Lodge diminished the time Porter could devote to pacification by increasing his burden of other routine business.⁶⁵

Whoever might be put in charge, the theoretical advantages of unified management in Saigon were at least partly offset by stubbornly intractable practical problems. Someone from USAID, USOM's Washington headquarters, noted the trouble sure to follow if station-paid members of the proposed combined teams got their money in the field on payday while the USOM-supported people waited for theirs to arrive from Saigon through the ministry.⁶⁶

Colby promised to try using agency experience to help streamline the USOM funding process, and made a good-faith effort to do so. But he ran up against institutional rules and statutory constraints that prevented any workable solution. Judging by this episode, the obstacles to unified management thus seem to have been rooted nearly as much in these factors as in reluctance to sacrifice organizational autonomy.⁶⁷

Substantive issues presented fewer problems. The station and USOM came to quick agreement on the training syllabus, and the first combined cadre-training course, for some 4,650 students, commenced at Vung Tau on 21 February

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1966. The new format, as described in a briefing for Vice President Humphrey, included the ten weeks' PAT program of weapons and tactics, political and social work, and intelligence. Every trainee was to receive this basic agenda, even the illiterate and semiliterate, for whom special training and evaluation techniques had been developed. To the basic course, the new syllabus added three weeks of instruction in things like hamlet administration, Census-Grievance, and village self-defense and warning systems.⁶⁸

In April, Robert Komer made his first visit to Saigon after being named White House adviser on Vietnam affairs. President Johnson wanted Komer to perform an executive role, breaking down the departmental barriers to unified Washington management of the civilian programs in Vietnam. Johnson did not hesitate to specify program content; for example, he urged Komer to push for rural electrification in Vietnam, pointing out how this had worked for him in Texas. This suggestion did not survive Komer's visit to Saigon. Briefings there emphasized the Revolutionary Development concept, and Komer returned to tell Johnson that, while the RD program had some "questionable aspects," it looked like "the most promising approach yet developed." General Thang's Ministry of Revolutionary Development was "better than most," and the Vung Tau and montagnard centers together were pumping out 5,500 graduates every fifteen weeks.⁶⁹

Komer had arrived in Saigon at a moment that the mission believed offered an opportunity to loosen the VC hold on the rural population. Deputy Ambassador Porter brought the issue into high relief with an early April memorandum to Komer asserting that "the growing military capability to sweep the VC out of key areas" was "outrunning our ability to insert teams to hold the areas swept." Porter wanted to double Revolutionary Development training capacity from an annual rate of 19,000 cadres to 39,000 by the end of the year, and Komer pursued this goal upon his return to Washington. President Johnson endorsed the idea, and a bureaucratic scramble ensued to determine who would pay what share of the cost. With the budgetary issue unresolved, DCI William Raborn approved CIA's participation "in principle" and authorized \$450,000 for a new training center for which he said the agency expected to be reimbursed.⁷⁰

The first Revolutionary Development (or, in Vietnamese translation, Rural Construction) Cadre teams graduated from the Vung Tau school—now the GVN's National Training Center—on 21 May 1966. Prime Minister Ky gave the graduation address in the presence of two ARVN corps commanders and several cabinet ministers, and an embassy observer interpreted this as reflecting genuine high-level GVN interest in the program. The integration of PAT and

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conventional rural administrative functions, and the added responsibility of organization for hamlet defense, raised the size of each team from forty to fifty-nine. The station took pride in having brought some women into the program, although the ratio did not yet exceed one in about thirty.⁷¹

For the first time since the Lansdale station worked with the Vietnamese Army in 1955, and excepting the Counter-Terror program, the CIA contribution to pacification now came in support of regular GVN programs rather than as a substitute in their absence. The new RD unit's tasks now included, for example, the organization of local elections and the administration of GVN economic development projects, most of them financed by USOM. Questions remained whether the GVN and its American advisers now shared an understanding of the insurgency and a strategy to defeat it, and whether they assigned similar importance to pacification in their command arrangements and distribution of resources. On neither side was there unanimity, and the evolution of the program thus faced not only disaccord between the GVN and the United States but uncertainties and inconsistencies on each side.⁷²

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The new opportunity to win the countryside that Ambassador Porter and others thought they saw in the spring of 1966 was accompanied by daunting obstacles. A task force convened by Porter in April noted many of them: communist military strength, organizational weaknesses and confused mission assignments in the GVN and among U.S. agencies, continued GVN instability, overemphasis on the material side of pacification, and “weaknesses of Vietnamese administration and motivation.” The group saw additional problems, including poor security in areas of RD team deployments, “overlapping security forces,” lack of common conceptual ground between Americans and Vietnamese, and a destructive emphasis, apparently on both sides, on “rapid expansion and . . . immediate visible and statistical progress.”¹

The task force might have added the absence of conceptual common ground even within the American camp. The consensus—not joined by General Westmoreland—about using the station’s People’s Action Teams as the nucleus of a unified GVN pacification program concealed the usual unexamined, even unacknowledged, differences about the causes of the insurgency and the nature of Viet Cong influence. The proper role of the peasantry in the pacification process, its attitudes toward GVN and the communists, and the end state of the entire process were lost in the always-frantic effort to recover the initiative for the Saigon government.

And then there was MACV. General Westmoreland reacted with considerable reserve to Ambassador Porter’s call for rapid RD Cadre expansion. He acknowledged the superior performance of some PATs, but attributed this entirely to their material benefits and better military equipment and training, relative to the Popular Forces. PAT training was mostly military, he claimed,

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and its “minimum political and motivational instruction” merely equipped it to perform “some civic action functions.” Despite what he perceived as their military emphasis, Westmoreland said he wanted to see the PATs continue under civilian direction. Unaware of or indifferent to the agency’s perception of the war as an essentially political contest, he interpreted CIA’s leading role in the PAT program as a historical accident: “The program has been under [CIA] primarily because [CIA] had the money and personnel to devote to [it].”²

Money and personnel were, of course, precisely what CIA lacked. What it did have, in addition to managerial and logistic flexibility, was some understanding of the ineluctable need to engage Vietnamese villagers, not only the urban elite, in bringing their compatriots to the GVN side. Westmoreland lost the forest in the trees when he admonished Washington not to neglect the impact of Revolutionary Development Cadre group (RDCG) recruiting on the availability of sufficient Popular and Regional forces to protect the RD teams.³

But Westmoreland had a point, even if he did not make it explicit: a certain level of manpower had to be committed to each essential aspect of pacification if the GVN were to extend its writ in the countryside while defending what it already owned. But no one seems to have tried to quantify the total requirement, perhaps out of fear that such a calculation would suggest a GVN inability even to survive, let alone extend its authority, without a long-term American troop commitment.

Buddhist Politics

Pacification began as and remained an essentially local process, with its initial prospects determined by the relative strength and competence of the opposing political organs and of the military forces supporting them. Other, larger factors set the environment for these local efforts, one of these being the priority assigned to pacification by senior Vietnamese and allied military commanders. Another environmental influence was the attitude of the Buddhist clergy. The dissidence of the politically active An Quang school of South Vietnamese Buddhism and the violent GVN reaction to it had provoked the American decision in 1963 to abandon President Ngo Dinh Diem. Continuing An Quang suspicion of Catholic and Northern influences in ARVN guaranteed tension also with the military governments that succeeded Diem.⁴

In the spring of 1966, this tension produced the so-called Struggle Movement, in which the An Quang Buddhists defied the GVN, then led by two of their *bêtes noires*, Prime Minister Nguyen Cao Ky and Directory chairman Nguyen Van Thieu. As the atmosphere heated up in early April, especially in I

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Corps, the station hoped that the secular political affiliations of many cadres there, both RDC and Counter-Terror, would prevent their succumbing to an intensifying wave of popular dissidence. But it expected GVN district chiefs and their 8,800 RD cadres to display active opposition to local Struggle Committees only if the government moved decisively to restore its authority in Hue and Da Nang. As of mid-April, the GVN was still temporizing.⁵

In the three northernmost provinces, GVN passivity spelled disaster for the cadre programs. In Quang Tri, just below the demilitarized zone, the provincial administration simply collapsed, and the RD Committee abdicated any leadership or management function. Buddhist propaganda describing the cadre teams as American mercenaries made many converts, and in general what the station had seen as a “fairly effective cadre program was ruined.” Not until October, with the province ruled by a tough new chief, was the station to see a return to “modest but tangible” progress.⁶

The station tried to isolate its cadres from the Struggle Movement, for it wanted both to keep them loyal to the GVN and to avoid involvement in repressive efforts that would damage their standing with Buddhist sympathizers. In this it largely succeeded; it saw the PATs as having “exercised admirable restraint and control as individuals and discipline beyond our expectations as an organization.” In addition to the station effort to quarantine the cadre teams, CIA and embassy officers worked on the Buddhist leadership, trying to demonstrate the program’s constructive purposes. Thich Tam Chau, a moderate among senior bonzes, accepted an offer to tour Vung Tau, and the embassy tried to soften up dissident leader Thich Tri Quang, who displayed his bias in the claim that people around Hue had labeled the program “Rural Destruction.”⁷

These attempts to mollify the dissident clergy supplemented the main effort, in which the station sought to isolate its cadre teams from the contending parties. This effort included sequestering a group that returned to Da Nang from Vung Tau training at the height of the confrontation between Buddhists and the GVN. Dick Hamasaki, the agency’s provincial Quang Nam adviser, trucked the group directly from the Da Nang airport to a nearby schoolhouse and kept it there until GVN forces broke Buddhist resistance in the city. As his then-assistant Gary Williams later noted, this kind of improvisation depended on the station’s responsive logistic system. Lacking the means to feed the returning cadres, the advisers called Saigon on their single sideband radio that afternoon. A C-123 cargo plane arrived the next morning with supplies, including rice and *nuoc mam*, the ubiquitous Vietnamese fish sauce.⁸

The station’s success in keeping its teams from joining the Struggle Movement served to intensify Buddhist hostility to the program. Armed Buddhists

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stormed the Hue provincial RD Headquarters in early June, seizing 87 new and 448 “used or nonserviceable” weapons. Embassy political officers worked to persuade Thich Tri Quang the United States wanted only to resume the campaign against the VC, but the Buddhists kept up the attack, in one case denouncing PAT teams to the nearby U.S. Marine fire base. And the Marines did in fact direct some artillery fire at these putative VC before the matter was straightened out.⁹

On more than one occasion, blatant peculation by local Vietnamese supervisors threatened the integrity of the RD program, and their reaction to station efforts to preserve that integrity could threaten the health of station case officers. One such, newly arrived in Hue in early June 1966, asked for a briefing on the locations and present-for-duty strength of the Thua Thien Province teams. In the course of their survey, he and his Vietnamese interpreter visited the program warehouse, where they were set upon by a mob of some seventy RD cadres and physically abused by the provincial supervisor’s bodyguard. They were then held at gunpoint for half an hour before being ostentatiously freed by the supervisor, Nguyen Ngoc Ly, who turned out to be the instigator of the incident.¹⁰

The case officer’s inference that the affair was designed to discourage inquiry into program administration was soon confirmed by tips from dismayed cadres, who reported that Ly had padded the payroll with 260 ghost cadres. If that figure was correct, he was pocketing in the neighborhood of a million piasters a month. In addition, the 1,000 cadres actually being paid included a bloated headquarters element of some 120.¹¹

The province chief, at first influenced by the duplicitous Ly, soon accepted the American version of the incident but temporized on punitive measures, saying that the Buddhist crisis required his full attention. He may also have been influenced by the potential for trouble with local ARVN forces. As a Dai Viet stalwart, Ly had packed the program with party adherents, and CIA now learned of bad blood between RD cadres and ARVN units influenced by Dai Viet rival VNQDD. Concerned for the safety of its man on the scene, the station turned the matter over to the ministry, asking General Thang to send an investigative team. The reporting trail ends here, but blatant malfeasance by a GVN official usually resulted in his transfer without prejudice, and that is probably what eventually happened to Ly.¹²

Trying to Make a Rule of an Exception

The challenges posed by rapid expansion included shortages of qualified potential cadre recruits and effective instructors, as well as the strain on CIA and

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USOM logistic capabilities. But the central problem remained that of Vietnamese leadership. The American sponsors of program expansion recognized that the PATs and other station-supported teams owed their successes to the combination of CIA flexibility and the personal commitment of individual, working-level GVN officials. Large-scale expansion meant moving from the improvisational mode, essentially outside the GVN chain of command, to a more conventionally structured bureaucratic process. But GVN weaknesses had been the occasion of the improvisational approach in the first place. The question for pacification managers in mid-1966 was whether these could now be sufficiently ameliorated to let the program succeed under GVN management.

The performance of the first RD Cadre class, of May 1966, validated all the American concerns. Some provinces had screened their applicants poorly, resulting in mediocre recruits, and the Buddhist disorders of that spring and summer created a poor setting in which to deploy the new teams, or at least those recruited in Central Vietnam. But, as expected, it was local management and its frequent incomprehension that constituted the main problem. In some places, local GVN officials violated a cardinal rule when they deployed teams outside the members' home districts. One answer to this problem seemed to lie in leadership training, and General Thang and his advisers proposed a thirteen-week course for local supervisors. Province and district chiefs themselves could not be expected to leave their posts for that length of time, and for them the Ministry of Revolutionary Development (MRD) had proposed a seminar of two or three weeks at Vung Tau. One headquarters officer described all this as a constructive step, but he also thought that "more than seminars will be necessary."¹³

A survey of case officer opinion revealed the diversity of local GVN perceptions of the cadre programs. While some officials exploited them according to the RD formula, trying to win peasant loyalty, others saw them as just another security element or even, as in Hue, a partisan political force. A few opposed any RD Cadre presence at all. Inconsistency appeared also among the station's field case officers. Some of these, like some of their Vietnamese counterparts, saw the RDC team more as a weapon against the Viet Cong than as a device for attracting peasant support of the GVN. Even where conceptual conformity prevailed, as in the RD Ministry, poor administration hampered effective team deployment, and local authorities were confronted with the arbitrary way in which the ministry sometimes chose hamlets for RD team assignment.¹⁴

Compared with the well-intentioned civic action operations of the U.S. Marines, the RD program did indeed represent, as Bill Colby always insisted it must, a Vietnamese enterprise. But to the station, with its intense focus on

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immediate results, the desultory pace at which the GVN was taking hold of the effort forced the CIA to hold on to the initiative. The station noted that, although General Thang and Colonel Chau chafed under U.S. controls, they “have been somewhat slow in gearing themselves up to take over this program, so, of course, we had to continue to run it for them.”¹⁵

One American observer thought CIA should accept the blame for RD Cadre shortcomings. The charismatic John Paul Vann had left the army under a cloud after airing to the press his disagreement with American military programs in Vietnam while serving as an adviser during the Diem regime. Later to become MACV’s only civilian senior corps adviser, Vann was serving as USOM’s chief of field operations, in charge of participation in the cadre programs, when he visited Washington in June 1966.¹⁶

At this point, Vann had become a strident critic of the station. It was doing nothing, he charged, either to deal with the concern of General Thang and Colonel Chau about the program’s public identification with the agency or to assuage their resentment of control by Americans and U.S. “lackeys” at the training center. Vann also believed that the Dai Viet loyalties of Le Xuan Mai, chief of instruction at Vung Tau, had been unknown to the station until recent discord at the camp exposed the partisan slant of political indoctrination there.¹⁷

Vann’s prescriptions tended to the self-contradictory, and in so doing implicitly recognized the perpetual dilemma facing Americans trying to imbue the Vietnamese with American values and techniques. He objected to CIA sponsorship while describing the PAT program as the best of a flawed set of U.S.-sponsored pacification activities. He wanted both more respect for Vietnamese sensitivities and more Americans inspecting the fieldwork of the cadre teams. Bill Colby noted that, despite the bitterness of his complaints, Vann’s prescription seemed at most to call for preserving the essentials and eliminating the imperfections, exactly what everyone wanted to do.¹⁸

Invited to comment on Vann’s complaints, COS Gordon Jorgensen readily acknowledged the programs’ shortcomings, including what he saw as the imperious style of Richard Fortin, the station’s now-departed senior officer at the training center. But on some issues Jorgensen’s perspective substantially diverged. Dealing, for example, with Vann’s criticism of the military role of RDC teams in Quang Ngai, Jorgensen observed that more than 14,000 communist troops were operating in this province. Five major battles in two months with U.S. and ARVN forces had killed some 2,500 VC; the largest engagement had resulted from intelligence supplied by RDC and C-T teams. In the conditions obtaining in Quang Ngai, “even the [famously pacifist] Archbishop of

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Canterbury would have to turn paramilitary to survive.” Despite all this, Jorgensen said, station teams were proselyting among the villagers, still applying the Vung Tau formula in three Quang Ngai districts.¹⁹

Politics and Personalities at Vung Tau

Although events then unfolding at Vung Tau surprised the station less than John Paul Vann chose to believe, political and personal tensions there were indeed disrupting the National Training Center in June 1966. As chief of cadres at the Ministry of Revolutionary Development in Saigon, Colonel Chau was unsympathetic both to now-Major Mai and to what he saw as the conspicuous agency presence not only at Vung Tau but in the provinces. Chau later recalled thinking that Mai ran Vung Tau as if it were “his own domain,” unresponsive to the GVN. In addition, Chau’s own practice, which emphasized practical solutions to practical problems, differed sharply from Mai’s advocacy of a diffuse, almost mystical ideology.²⁰

With regard to the station’s profile, as Chau later recalled it, he had opposed neither CIA control of funds nor participation in project management. What he wanted was better cover for the CIA presence in the provinces, especially where weak local GVN leadership projected the station into an active management role and thus risked making the programs look like creatures of the agency. Chau appealed to Thang to make this case to Ambassador Lodge or COS Jorgensen, but Thang did not; Chau thought he was “scared of Donohue.” Chau’s view of the cover situation eventually did reach the COS, whose customary cordiality turned to icy aloofness; Chau inferred that he was seen as having turned against the agency. With his representations ignored, as he saw it, by all parties, Chau turned to John Paul Vann. Chau later saw this as a tactical mistake, for Vann took his case not to Jorgensen but to Lodge. Chau later concluded that this could only have confirmed the COS in his judgment about Chau’s disloyalty to the program.²¹

The question of Vung Tau staffing, after its absorption by the MRD, inserted another irritant into Chau’s relationship with the station. In the spring of 1966, General Thang approved Chau’s selection of Lieutenant Colonel Le Van Tinh as school commandant. Well aware of the CIA commitment to Major Mai, who was to stay as chief of training, Chau did not consult the station, but presented this move as a *fait accompli*. Mai’s supporters on the Vung Tau staff gave no support to their new commanding officer—he appears not to have been a strong personality—and in May General Thang announced his intention to replace Tinh with Colonel Chau.²²

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Mai's partisans found this even less palatable than the Tinh assignment. Mai's deputy, a captain named Phat despised by the station as "incompetent" and "insolent," instigated a mutiny by some 100 of the 600 instructors. Chau drove to Vung Tau on 9 June to try to restore order, but mutual suspicion had reached the point that he and Mai, each fearing to be kidnapped by the janisseries of the other, could not agree on a meeting site. Chau told the station that he might just as well quit, and in the uproar General Thang added his own threat to abandon Vung Tau and the entire program. Alger "Ace" Ellis, Tom Donohue's replacement as the station's rural covert action chief, shuttled between the contenders, finally arranging a meeting that evening. The resulting truce brought the camp back into operation, and the station announced that the second Rural Development Cadre course would start on the 10th.²³

Up to this point, the station had seen Mai as essential to the success of the Vung Tau training establishment. His perceived indispensability had influenced CIA to accept the risk of his affiliation with a political party, the Dai Viet, at least some of whose adherents advocated a third-force resolution of the war on terms that would require civilian government in the South. But ministerial outrage with Mai and Phat now gave the agency no choice but to acquiesce in new arrangements, and Chau was installed as commander while he and Thang looked for a new chief of training.²⁴

The truce between Chau and Mai did not prevent continued unrest among the instructors. The station agreed with General Thang that Chau's "lack of tact" might be one cause of the tension, but even so it quickly came to see his presence at Vung Tau as indispensable to keeping the facilities in operation. Mai was still there, and so was the intransigent Captain Phat, who was withholding from the training staff new ministerial publications intended for inclusion in the syllabus. At the end of June, Mai came under investigation for complicity in the Buddhists' Struggle Movement. New COS John Hart, acutely aware of General Thang's disillusionment with Mai, chose not to intervene on his behalf.²⁵

Chau's tenure might have been extended, despite Bill Colby's view of him as too much the mandarin, but Chau at this point removed Mai and ten of his cronies, and began harassing the remainder, who accused him of derogating them as "peasants." Arguing that the American presence damaged the GVN's image, Chau also began to lobby for station disengagement from everything at Vung Tau except payroll administration. But Chau had already weakened his standing with the minister by his "failure in personnel management and leadership," and General Thang now insisted on maintaining the status quo. In early August, Chau left his post and resigned from the army to run for the Lower House of the National Assembly.²⁶

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The candidate best qualified to replace him looked as if he might also be difficult to deal with. Earlier in the year, the station's program in VC-infested Binh Dinh province had brought its officer there into contact with Major Nguyen Be, the deputy province chief. As energetic as Chau, and as deeply committed to a civilian pacification strategy, Be was even more prickly and unyielding. But he ran afoul of the GVN satrap in II Corps, Lieutenant General Vinh Loc, and this circumstance, together with his passionate interest in pacification doctrine, led him to ask his CIA contact to recommend him for a job at the ministry. The station commented that, despite his qualifications as an "exceptionally talented pacification planner, his ingrained xenophobia and hyper-sensitive nationalism make him [an] unlikely prospect to function well in a bi-national atmosphere."²⁷

But Be was favorably known to Chau, who just before his own departure approved him as the new deputy commandant and chief of training at Vung Tau. Chau did not consult the station, but its reservations about Be were in any case rendered moot by the shortage of talent. When Chau left, Be was the only serious candidate to replace him.²⁸

Fortunately for the continuity of the programs, Be's sensitivities did not prevent a cooperative working relationship with the station. And his approach to the content of Vung Tau training apparently mirrored that of Chau, who later recalled their philosophies as fully compatible. Chau thought that, like

Foreground: Major Nguyen Be, commander of the Revolutionary Development Cadre Training Center, Vung Tau, c. 1967. The other officer is probably his deputy. (Courtesy of Lewis Lapham.)



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Left to right: Mrs. and Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker, Nguyen Be, and George Jacobson, U.S. Mission coordinator, Vung Tau, 1967. (Courtesy of Lewis Lapham.)

him, Be saw the struggle in the essentially political terms of winning the loyalty of the peasantry, with victory contingent on inculcating a new nationalistic spirit into the rural population. But both also saw the peasants as “victims of both sides,” needing protection not only from the Viet Cong but also from the colonial mentality of the line bureaucracy. And both were more pragmatic than ideological, with the establishment of local self-government one of their primary goals.²⁹

Whatever his attachment to mystical concepts of “fairy and dragon totemism,” Mai seems to have shared this agenda; the anarchic episode at Vung Tau represented a conflict more of egos and ambition than of competing theories of pacification. After Mai’s departure, the content of the motivational training may have become more service-oriented than visionary, but the skills portion of the syllabus appears to have remained essentially the same.

Logistics vs. Ideology

The disarray at Vung Tau was the first crisis to confront COS John Hart after he arrived in Saigon in late May 1966. Its resolution took place against

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the background of long-standing management issues. In the Ministry of Revolutionary Development, the GVN had centralized the management of the civilian side of pacification, but except for Komer's coordinating role in Washington, no such unification had taken place on the American side. Always hostile to the idea of MACV control, the station now lost its earlier enthusiasm for vesting USOM with authority for pacification. USOM itself, Hart told Colby, recognized the rigidity of its logistics, and if made responsible for pacification would abdicate this function to ARVN. In this event, Hart recognized, a militarized RD program would get the short end of the logistic stick.³⁰

Permanent CIA management seemed to Hart ruled out by the problem of agency exposure in the press, which was growing as fast as the programs themselves. The answer, Hart believed, lay in a new "ad hoc agency," headed by someone from outside CIA. This interagency entity should have ready access to agency support, and a "liberal salting of [CIA] personnel," though not so liberal as to make it look like an agency proprietary organization. Whatever the ratio of CIA to nonagency staff, the new organization should get CIA support in "logistics, finance, training, air [transportation], communications, and even personnel procurement." Hart suggested that the agency divest itself of its pacification programs by 1 January 1968. Staffing would still have to come at first mainly from CIA, with officers from the army, Marines, and Foreign Service trained and assigned as soon as possible.³¹

Colby thought Hart might have "somewhat overstated the vulnerability of the program to the naughty reputation of [CIA]," but agreed that an interagency task force represented the best way to go. He reminded Hart that one such entity existed already—the embassy pacification task force under Deputy Ambassador Porter—and urged the COS to make this the locus of the CIA effort. In any case, Colby seems to have been concerned less with organizational charts than with preserving the psychological momentum of the cadre programs. Acknowledging the obvious requirements to exploit the programs' intelligence potential and to assure proper accounting for expenditures, he twice urged Hart to preserve the programs' "revolutionary fervor."³²

Hart responded to these exhortations in lukewarm fashion, and Colby declared his readiness to "maintain a posture of confident patience" while Hart dealt with the management question. But Colby acknowledged finding this posture hard to maintain after reading an embassy telegram that referred to "the Prime Minister's discovery of confucianism as an excellent counterpoise to communism. Confucianism was not quite what we had in mind as revolutionary fervor." No reply to Colby's urging has been found, and the

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exchange apparently ended with no explicit, shared understanding of the ideological basis of the Vung Tau program.³³

Colby's recommendation that Hart exploit the embassy pacification task force reflected the debate in Washington that summer over reorganization of the U.S. Mission in Saigon. Defense Secretary McNamara wanted to transfer full pacification responsibility to MACV, but civilian opposition fended this off. Sharing McNamara's enthusiasm for more MACV engagement, Robert Komer urged Deputy Ambassador Porter to make more use of MACV personnel. Porter countered by asking Komer to recruit more and better-qualified advisers from the civilian agencies in Washington.³⁴

There were other distractions from Washington as the station worked to revive the training staff at Vung Tau. Headquarters sent an anxious cable about a critical news article read into the *Congressional Record* by Senator Eugene McCarthy (D-MN), and about a subsequent Neal Sheehan piece, datelined Vung Tau, in the *New York Times*. Sheehan's pessimistic recital included poor instructors, the recruitment of overage and draft-dodging cadres, and provincial officials taking kickbacks from cadre recruits.

Headquarters demanded to know who had leaked the material to Sheehan, and John Hart responded by pointing out that the programs were large and overt; no one had "leaked" anything. He added that there was no way to prevent newsmen from visiting overt installations, and that both he and his Vung Tau people had talked to Sheehan, hoping to encourage an objective account. It appeared that Sheehan had adopted a sensationalist tone to lend interest to an otherwise prosaic story, and Hart told headquarters to expect more of the same. In any case, he pointed out, Sheehan's criticisms were all "to some extent true." Headquarters tried again, asking Hart to identify the sources of a third article, but the COS simply referred the matter to Deputy Ambassador Porter, who ignored it.³⁵

Next into the act was the Bureau of the Budget. General Thang had proposed and the mission had accepted a fifty-nine-man format for the RDC team, this increase over the original PAT's forty members being designed to allow simultaneous deployment in three hamlets. The bureau wanted to economize by cutting team size back to forty. John Hart replied with a short explanation of the need for the larger unit, and concluded by offering "for your consideration—we could train the next 30,000 . . . as 1-man teams and get the country pacified 59 times as quickly."³⁶

Bill Colby noted the uncertainty on the Hill about the purposes and scale of the RDC program, and about CIA responsibility and authority for it. These doubts were compounded by Hart's suggestion of material support from the

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agency to an enhanced role for USAID. Colby noted to the COS that “we have no very clear charter in the field,” and he proposed to visit Saigon to work out explicit mission statements for the agency, USAID, and the Defense Department.³⁷

The visitor turned out to be not Colby but Robert Komer, who traveled to Vietnam in late June. His subsequent report to the president, shared with the heads of the defense and foreign policy agencies, got a chilly reception at CIA. The DCI’s Vietnam adviser, former COS Peer De Silva, conceded the validity of Komer concerns like resources control, GVN passivity, reception of VC defectors, port congestion, and land tenure. But De Silva found it “appalling” that Komer’s analysis of the reasons for lagging pacification did not take into account the doctrinal basis of any valid pacification scheme. He thought the U.S. military simply unable to comprehend the motivational core of the station’s effort, and predicted that if MACV took over pacification responsibility, the effort would fail. De Silva’s deputy, George Carver, agreed that doctrine accounted even more than administrative flexibility for the superiority of the CIA approach. He objected to Komer’s “tone of activist omniscience” and to the assumption that seizing the pacification initiative was solely a matter of effectively deploying enough material resources.³⁸

Komer had invited comments, and a reply from DCI Helms expressed cautious reservations about the effect of greater MACV participation. Implying that the doctrinal integrity of the program might suffer under military stewardship, Helms declared that “we should be very sure that all Americans engaged in the program start from its basic principle of motivating the population . . . , rather than its statistical successes in terms of VC KIA [killed in action].”³⁹

In fact, the indoctrination to which most of the agency officers involved in the program attached so much importance was aimed more at the cadres themselves than at the villagers. Major Mai and advisers like Tom Donohue recognized that the teams, still politically unsophisticated after training at Vung Tau, would get little ideological support from local GVN supervisors whose mentality had been shaped by an archaic mandarin and colonial tradition. Accordingly, Vung Tau training aimed at equipping the teams to win rural loyalties with a combination of social services, military security, and economic benefits.⁴⁰

The early results of this approach can be inferred from a USIS survey in mid-1966 that concluded that, where popular attitudes toward the RD program could be discerned, “they might be summed up as: 1) mild interest in the purpose of the cadre’s visit . . . ; (2) some pleasure at being the beneficiary of the cadre’s projects, as long as the villagers don’t have to contribute too much;

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3) no real understanding of what the RD program is; and 4) in many cases, considerable anxiety as to what the VC will do when the cadre leaves.” The program looked to the villagers like a “means of improving living conditions, not as a step toward transforming Vietnamese society.”⁴¹

Peasant concern about VC reaction, as expressed to the USIS poll-takers, reflected the fact that the cadre teams, whether in the original PAT format or expanded into RDC teams, provided real—if limited—protection only during their stay in a hamlet. Security after they left was “spotty,” in Tom Donohue’s word; sometimes they had established a warning system to facilitate the reaction of local forces to a VC incursion, sometimes not. There was at best no regular program of arming hamlet defenders, and no assurance of outside help to counter VC attacks that exceeded the local capacity to deter or repel.⁴²

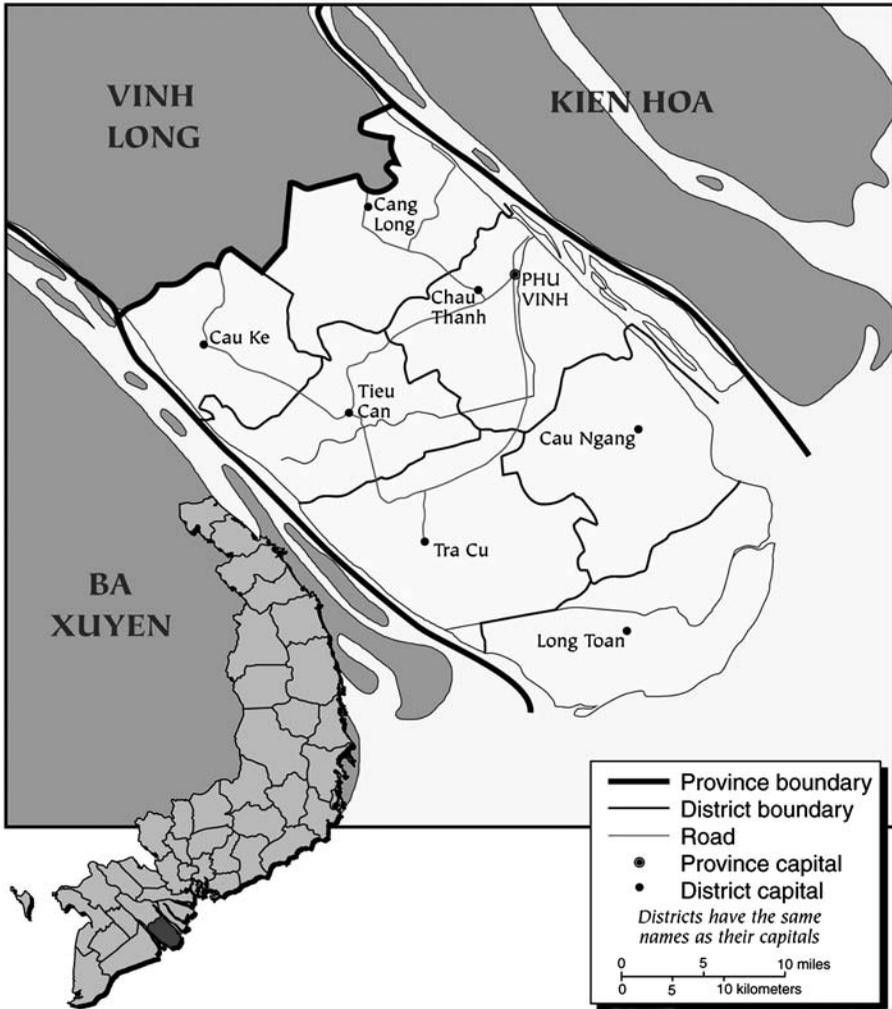
Whatever their shortcomings, the RD cadres seemed to a U.S. Mission working group to be “the critical element” in any pacification formula. But they were not a panacea, and would fail in the absence of “radical reform within the GVN including its Armed Forces.” This reform would have to include dissolving the ARVN Rangers, whom the working group charged with “intolerable conduct toward the populace.” The group had other, less controversial, recommendations as well, such as reorganizing the territorial forces under the Interior Ministry, but lacked the authority to impose any of them.⁴³

Winning the War in Tieu Can

While officials in Saigon and Washington argued about pacification doctrine and organization, case officers in the provinces were trying to get results with the resources at hand. These results included, in the spring of 1966, a signal success in Vinh Binh Province. An officer from the embassy’s political section, reporting on the situation there, found two-thirds of Tieu Can District to have been “pacified in reality, as well as on paper. Large VC units cannot enter . . . without risking being quickly reported. . . . They have attempted company-size attacks against secured hamlets in the district but have failed to inflict great damage.” All this progress came about in 1966, when CIA “decided to take [a] chance” on District Chief Captain Lam Van Bien and to concentrate resources, manpower and weapons in the district.⁴⁴

The visiting embassy officer credited success in Tieu Can to “the efforts of the [CIA] advisers. They have not over-advised, are not constantly with the cadres, and . . . Vietnamese initiative is encouraged so that the effort will continue when American support is eventually reduced.” Another embassy officer shared the perception of progress in Tieu Can, and offered reasons both for the

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Administrative map of Vinh Binh Province, c. 1965.

success there and for doubt about its durability. Over half the population was either Catholic or ethnic Cambodian, and inclined to oppose the VC. Captain Bien was financially independent, and there was no sign of corruption in program administration, but this happy circumstance depended on Bien's continued tenure.⁴⁵

Other favorable circumstances included the early involvement of additional

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highly capable people, both GVN and American. Case officer Karl Bruce*, fresh out of covert operations training, arrived in Vinh Binh in 1965. There, he quickly assimilated the purposes and techniques of the program, which he conveyed in his terse, unornamented style to his local counterparts. Perhaps the most committed of the Vietnamese participants was an ethnic Cambodian ARVN lieutenant. The man's family had suffered at the hands of the Viet Cong, and Bruce moved to exploit his intense motivation by getting him assigned to head the new Counter-Terror team. There, the lieutenant used his highly personal hatred of the communists to indoctrinate his fifty-odd irregulars.⁴⁶

The province chief played so small a role in agency-sponsored work in Vinh Binh that his name never appeared in station reporting. But if he displayed little understanding of the programs' political and psychological dimensions, he welcomed them if only for their firepower. Unlike Colonel Chau, in the intimately collaborative effort in neighboring Kien Hoa, he took no active part in program management. The MACV advisory team was equally cordial but maintained a similarly detached stance; according to Bruce's then-assistant, Gary Williams, "we ran our programs and they ran theirs."⁴⁷

All this meant that Bruce and Williams relied on their own devices to ensure program effectiveness and integrity. Neither officer spoke French or Vietnamese, and they exploited their two excellent Vietnamese interpreters, veterans of the CIDG program, to develop informants among the cadres. With respect to Counter-Terror activity, Bruce continually pushed for physical evidence, such as captured weapons, that confirmed reported successes. He assiduously applied the Census-Grievance principle of repeated interviews with the villagers. The intelligence aspect of this activity was less sophisticated than that of the parent program in Kien Hoa, devoting relatively little attention to VC political order of battle. Nevertheless, the C-G effort in Vinh Binh acquired a substantial volume of information on the local Viet Cong, which Bruce and Williams often used to target the C-T teams.⁴⁸

Counter-Terror tasking always had the capture of VC cadres as a desideratum, but most results came in the form of kills. Gary Williams recalled this as dictated by the rigors of the combat environment, but it may be that the pursuit of revenge by the unit's grimly motivated leader also played a part.⁴⁹

The accomplishments of the PATs and their successors, the RDC teams, remained the most difficult to measure. Williams later recalled that the first PAT to serve in Vinh Binh performed well, providing basic medical care and agricultural extension services. But its effect on the villagers' political commit-

*Indicates a pseudonym for a CIA officer whose identity is still protected.

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ment remained in doubt. Working in a hamlet judged fully secure, the team retired one night to sleep in the dispensary building. Having posted no security, it was surprised by infiltrators, who easily penetrated to the building. Tossing grenades inside, they killed two or three cadres and wounded a dozen more. There was no way to tell whether the perpetrators had made their way into the hamlet without help, or whether they had been led by one or more residents, whose service could have been either voluntary or coerced.⁵⁰

Only in Tieu Can District, supporting Captain Bien, did Bruce and Williams succeed in marshalling the combined efforts of U.S. and even GVN agencies. Although the embassy attributed success there to CIA's advisers, the record suggests that Captain Bien, like Colonel Chau in Kien Hoa Province, served as the main catalytic agent. The station was at pains to credit the contributions of USOM, USIS, the National Police, and the Vietnam Information Service. This local mobilization reclaimed seventeen hamlets between January and October 1966; only nine of the district's fifty had belonged to the government at the beginning of the year. In these loyal hamlets, Bien dispensed with ARVN and territorial forces for local security, depending instead on militias recruited by the cadre teams. He also arranged to train a village medic, for, like district chiefs everywhere, he faced the perennial reluctance of provincial bureaucrats, including health officials, to get out into the villages.⁵¹

While the province chief and the ARVN division commander were doing little to help in Tieu Can, they had also done nothing to sabotage the effort merely because it wasn't theirs. The question remained whether their successors would at least continue this permissive approach. Indeed, the only durable factor favoring the GVN in Tieu Can was the presence of anti-VC Cambodian and Catholic communities. It remained to be seen whether the effort would continue when Captain Bien left and when GVN management eventually had to make do without American support.⁵²

But for the time being, at least, Tieu Can District showed what rigorous application of the pacification formula could accomplish. One of its hamlets, Tan Truong Giong, became the first to draw a VC attack in greater than company strength. At 0200 hours on 21 January 1967, a VC battalion assaulted hamlet defenses manned by the RDC team and the new hamlet self-defense unit. After three hours of combat, including some hand-to-hand fighting and the timely arrival of a C-47 gunship with its crushingly rapid rate of fire, the VC broke off. Only two defenders died in the attack, while subsequent intelligence claimed to have located some sixty new VC graves near Tan Truong Giong. The morning after the attack, twenty more villagers volunteered for the unpaid hamlet militia. The episode exemplified the synergistic energy of a

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disciplined, competent, well-equipped RDC team, a motivated hamlet militia, good defensive positions, and a district chief ready with reaction firepower. All these combined to defeat an attack of unprecedented scale, representing what the embassy saw as VC determination to deal pacification “a crippling blow.”⁵³

Two months later, some 3,000 villagers voted with their feet when they fled a nearby VC-controlled area and took refuge in villages defended by Captain Bien’s militias. A headquarters account of this migration described their motivation as springing from resentment of VC taxation and intimidation, and from fear of allied air and artillery strikes. It appeared that “the concern uppermost in the minds of these people was security,” and headquarters anticipated other operations like that in Tieu Can to induce further erosion of the communists’ base of support in Vinh Binh Province.⁵⁴

An Inconclusive Effort in Long Tuyen

Every locale presented its own problems and opportunities. Like Vinh Binh, its neighbor to the east, Phong Dinh Province, was free of significant North Vietnamese Army forces, but this did not offset a combination of unfavorable geography, local VC military strength, and disarray in the local GVN. In Long Tuyen village, only five kilometers from the capital at Can Tho, four RD teams working among the village’s 19,000 residents had built fishponds and fences, strung monkey bridges across streams, and roofed the local Buddhist temple. Despite limited participation by the villagers in all this, the local MACV adviser thought he saw a favorable response to the work of the RD cadres.⁵⁵

The three hamlets comprising Long Tuyen village stretched out along four kilometers of the Binh Tuy canal. This configuration made the village hard to defend, and the presence on pacification duty of four Regional Forces companies, a Police Field Force company, and a Counter-Terror team did not prevent a VC attack that decimated one of the RF companies. An RD team working across the river from the attack took mortar fire that killed one cadre and wounded half a dozen others. Nevertheless, a few days later, RD morale was said to be high. The province chief declared all three Long Tuyen hamlets secure and the teams ready for deployment elsewhere. But the local MACV adviser thought otherwise; if the RD cadres left, the VC would quickly restore the status quo ante, and “the villagers will have another example of GVN inability to make good on a pledge to provide security.”⁵⁶

The province chief had little competence as either soldier or administrator, and his initial resistance to the Long Tuyen effort had aggravated chronic tension with local U.S. advisers. The district chief, otherwise highly regarded,

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opposed the Long Tuyen project because it was being run by a task force headed by the provincial RF/PF commander. This officer reported directly to the province chief, whom the district chief despised. The task force commander, a Captain Thu, shared none of the province chief's optimism about GVN prospects in Phong Dinh. "Not a favorite of his MACV advisers," according to the embassy reporter, Captain Thu "described almost with relish the successful VC attack on his own troops at Mieu Ong which, he said, confirmed his own pessimism about security." Thu went on, "cheerfully predicting" that if the RD campaign were not halted, the MACV field command post supporting it would be "wiped out by the VC 'within a month. . . Boom! Boom! Boom! Mortars fall everywhere.'" With such leadership, success like that in Tieu Can District was not to be expected.⁵⁷

The Balance of Forces

According to a Viet Cong document captured by the U.S. Army in early 1967, the communists lost their hold on some 1 million villagers during the year ending in mid-1966. These losses must have been heaviest in the north, where most of the U.S. ground forces were deployed, for they did not result in appreciable gains by the GVN's U.S.-supported pacification programs. Elsewhere, in parts of II Corps and in the populous provinces of III and IV Corps, the embassy group saw only "marginal ARVN perimeter security," which had produced "cadre resignations, absenteeism, and refusal to work in hamlets in these areas." The effect of weak security on morale was aggravated by what General Thang and Major Be saw as status conflicts among team cadres (probably between PAT members and regular bureaucrats), lack of technical competence, poor leadership, "inadequate popular cooperation and participation," ill-coordinated GVN support, and a preoccupation with statistical measures of progress.⁵⁸

In late August, the station evaluated current progress as "marginal and confined primarily to more secure areas." But it expressed confidence that as weaknesses were remedied, and U.S. forces moved into III and IV Corps, the program would "commence to fulfill basic rural political nation-building objectives." COS Hart cited as one reason for this optimism a GVN decision in July to make ARVN responsible for RD Cadre security in areas undergoing pacification.⁵⁹

Hart's prediction avoided the ominous implications of introducing U.S. combat forces as a prerequisite to pacification even in areas still free of North Vietnamese forces. Ambassador Lodge, after visiting VC-dominated Hau Nghia, acknowledged that the VC had already absorbed the province's male

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youth, and that the province chief saw U.S. military operations in the Ho Bo Woods as having left the local VC organization intact. But “the *main* roads are *usually* open to *military* traffic *in the daytime*.” Seeing in that a reason to rejoice, Lodge inadvertently revealed how far the pacification process still had to go. He applauded the increase in GVN police activity and in educational and economic projects in the ninety days since the arrival of the U.S. Twenty-fifth Infantry Division. But he understood the vulnerability even of the modest results achieved thus far, questioning “how durable all this is.” It would certainly take some time to “consolidate,” he said, but he did not venture to guess how long.⁶⁰

If, as most civilian U.S. officials now believed, the Revolutionary Development Cadre program was essential to the pacification process, consolidation in Hau Nghia remained a distant hope. U.S. provincial advisers there thought little of the three fifty-nine-man teams deployed in the summer of 1966. Team leaders quarreled with local GVN officials, and some of the men looked more like draft dodgers than elite cadremen. The MACV senior adviser opined that “if the program was completely under Vietnamese control, GVN officials might be more energetic in improving cadres.” He had probably not been in Vietnam long enough to learn that an unbroken GVN record of failure to govern the countryside had produced the current arrangement, with all its effects both good and bad. And his view may have been colored by the pervasive MACV hostility to any nonmilitary program that employed firearms and competed for draft-age manpower. But CIA representation in Hau Nghia at this time was weak, and the programs other than Counter-Terror were probably in fact accomplishing little.⁶¹

A headquarters desk review of provincial reports for July 1966 identified many of the same problems cited by GVN and U.S. officials in Saigon. But it inclined, unlike John Hart, to see a glass half empty rather than half full. It acknowledged that “individual cases of good-to-excellent team performance are not uncommon. . . . Well led and motivated teams perform well . . . when they receive sufficient attention, direction and support”; but their efforts were often nullified by the absence of GVN support. “On the whole, it cannot be said that the Program is going well at present, or that significant progress will be realized in the near future.”⁶²

Assistant Secretary of Defense John T. McNaughton adopted an even bleaker tone in a draft memorandum for the president that he sent to DCI Richard Helms. What he called U.S. “emergency actions” over the previous eighteen months had prevented a Viet Cong victory. But success depended in the long run on pacification, and in this area “progress . . . has been neg-

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ligible.” Secretary McNamara reinforced this view after an October visit to Vietnam, reporting that “pacification is a bad disappointment . . . [it] has, if anything, gone backward.”⁶³

Washington’s relatively pessimistic outlook served to heighten the perceived need for managerial reform in Saigon. The standoff on this issue had continued as Ambassador Lodge, abetted by Deputy Ambassador Porter and the civilian members of the Mission Council, continued to resist a bigger role for MACV. In August, Komer wanted to force Lodge’s hand, but the president, preferring not to antagonize his Republican ambassador, instructed him to back off. Lodge then announced his intention to leave Saigon in 1967, and Komer was allowed to suggest to Porter that General Westmoreland take over the programs, with Porter running them as his deputy for pacification. Porter demurred, telling Komer of USOM and station agreement with his view that the military’s short tours of duty, its lesser competence in civilian matters, and its lack of the “requisite political sophistication” all argued against such a move.⁶⁴

As late as 22 September, John Hart was confident that the mission’s stance had prevailed, and after McNamara’s visit the embassy thought the issue had gone away. But it had not, and the defense secretary remained persuaded of the need not only to make the American effort more effective but to jolt the South Vietnamese out of their perceived complacency. On 4 November 1966, President Johnson informed Lodge that the civilians had at most another four months to unify the various mission activities—social, economic, police, defector reception, public information, and hamlet security—that bore on rural pacification. Three days later, General Westmoreland set up a Revolutionary Development Support Directorate. Lodge, obviously not realizing that his inaction guaranteed the outcome he wanted to avoid, continued to stall for another two weeks. Finally, on 21 November, he set up the Office of Civil Operations (OCO), under Deputy Ambassador Porter. But he signaled his displeasure with the new arrangement by then departing for a month’s vacation, leaving Porter to try to manage both the embassy and the new pacification office. The newly appointed OCO staff director, a USOM officer, also left to take his scheduled home leave.⁶⁵

In the lengthy debate that preceded the creation of OCO, no one but Bill Colby seems to have addressed the basic issue. In the most trenchant analysis to appear at this key juncture, he rejected the conventional focus on managerial efficiency and military security, addressing not only the operational prerequisites to pacification but the nature of the process itself. Pacification must begin, he insisted, with “some degree of engagement by the population as shown

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by a willingness to contribute to intelligence, local security and community development.” He saw an increasingly “impatient desire on our part to impose ‘pacification’ and security on the population rather than engaging it in a common effort.” But while Colby rightly noted the coercive overtone to the term “pacification,” he still left undefined the “revolution” he saw as the goal of any potentially successful effort.⁶⁶

George Carver endorsed Colby’s vision of a rural population actively committed to a “common effort,” although like Colby he saw no need to ask whether this would require giving the villagers a share of political power. McNamara’s report of his October trip to Vietnam skirted this issue entirely. The defense secretary called for unspecified efforts at “motivating the people to cooperate,” and he saw a need for “responsive local government.” But his prescriptions had a paternalistic tone reflecting conventional American and GVN attitudes toward the villagers that Colby, at least, was trying to transcend.⁶⁷

None of the argument about operational control of pacification programs implied anything but continued agency responsibility to pay for them. On 9 August, Komer and Bureau of the Budget director Charles Schultze had written to DCI Helms, rejecting a request that CIA be relieved of this burden. They said they agreed with Ambassadors Lodge and Porter that CIA should pay the bill through fiscal year 1967, and they directed Helms to develop a budget and plans for FY 1968 “on the assumption that this responsibility will continue through that fiscal year.” An unhappy Helms said he would comply. But he noted the potential effect on the covert activities for which Congress had appropriated the agency budget, and appealed to Komer and Schultze for their “strong support to obtain [from other sources] the necessary funds and manpower.”⁶⁸

The Search for a Measure of Progress

One of the chronically most tortured questions of the war in Vietnam, more so even than that of the right pacification formula, involved the measurement of pacification progress or regress. Ever since the discovery that the optimism of the late Diem years had been sadly misplaced, American officials concerned with the war in the countryside had worried about the ability of quantitative reporting to produce valid judgments about who was winning. The question acquired new urgency as both Washington and Saigon placed new emphasis in 1966 on the struggle for the allegiance of the rural population.

In late October 1966, McNamara asked Helms to come up with a set of reporting criteria that would measure the effect of all American-supported

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GVN pacification activity. McNamara's choice of the agency, rather than his own intelligence people, to do this probably reflected his experience with the credulous MAAG and MACV reporting of the Diem era. As it happened, his request came at a moment when the agency was already trying to develop an effective conceptual tool to track the accomplishments—or failures, as the case might be—of its own programs. Both CIA and McNamara were favorably impressed by the U.S. Marines' reporting on General Walt's pacification efforts in I Corps, and McNamara wanted to believe that "some combination of indices, data and appropriate benchmarks" could be devised that would convey the qualitative effect of the overall effort.⁶⁹

Asked to suggest such a set of criteria, John Hart and his pacification team in Saigon specified ARVN protection of the villages from attack by VC or North Vietnamese regulars. Second came the need to prevent "infiltration and sneak attacks by local VC guerrillas." This would require reaction by a hamlet defense force possessing its own intelligence capability and an early-warning system. A "viable local government (elected or appointed)" would have to feel safe enough to spend the night in the hamlet, and a functioning Census-Grievance office and a police presence would be required. Hart's other criteria concerned social and economic activity, the effect of which should be visible in "evidence of change . . . from a fatalistic and apathetic approach to life to a more independent and mechanistic viewpoint; increased self-interest in health and sanitation; the use of more advanced agricultural methods; etc."⁷⁰

Hart loftily endorsed the Marines' reporting format—"Their graphs and charts are handsome"—which he thought could be adapted to display the application of the station's criteria. But he doubted the long-term effect of Marine Corps pacification work, which put excessive reliance on an American presence in the hamlet. As of August 1966, according to the station, not one affected hamlet was secure enough for this presence to be withdrawn.⁷¹

The agency's response to McNamara evolved in a session at headquarters that began on a Wednesday afternoon and continued late into the evening. John O'Reilly, recently returned from Kien Hoa, later recalled his own contribution to the session in terms of an insistent call for simplicity, for he thought it essential not to overwhelm already heavily burdened province officers with paperwork. The resulting checklist resembled John Hart's in its emphasis on the presence and effectiveness of a hamlet self-defense unit, and on the willingness of the hamlet government to spend the night in the hamlet. It also addressed the villagers' disposition to volunteer intelligence on the VC. The effort to preserve simplicity resulted in a group of six sets

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of pacification indicators, three in each, to be graded at one of five levels of accomplishment.⁷²

The scheme distinguished between Viet Cong military and “terrorist/subversive” capabilities. On the GVN side, it proposed to evaluate hamlet defenses and “administrative and political development,” with two additional indicators summarizing social and economic development. The authors believed that their grid made it “virtually impossible for the rating officer to fudge,” and that it precluded a high composite score if one key area was weak. They pointed out that the grid omitted statistics they considered “unreliable or essentially irrelevant: KIA [killed in action], yards of barbed wire strung, blockhouses built, fingerlings distributed, etc.”⁷³

Mandated on a Monday, brainstormed on Wednesday, and coordinated inside CIA on Thursday, the proposal reached Secretary McNamara on Friday. He approved it on the spot, after which it received pro forma review in the State and Defense departments. George Allen then flew to Saigon to test what became known as the Hamlet Evaluation System. He encountered some unhappiness at MACV, which had commissioned a contractor to study the matter, but Ambassador Lodge liked the new format and decreed its nationwide application as of 1 January 1967.⁷⁴

Allen envisioned a computerized compilation of data, beginning at the hamlet level, capable of serving management as a tool for selecting pacification sites and evaluating programs and techniques. But the whole scheme was soon corrupted, in his view, by the impulse in Washington—White House adviser Walt Rostow was the driving force—to generate a nationwide pacification scorecard. Additional stress on the system’s integrity came from growing pressure on advisers, especially the military, to show progress.⁷⁵

The cable asking for Hart’s suggestions had specified that CIA was only to develop the criteria; their use, after interagency clearance, would be a U.S. Mission responsibility. But McNamara seems to have forgotten this condition, for he proceeded to task DCI Helms with implementation. George Allen recalled reminding the director that this would put CIA in the position of monitoring the activity of other U.S. agencies, and an abashed Helms got back to McNamara to say that CIA could help only with a trial run.⁷⁶

Prelude to Militarization

CIA made what looks in retrospect like a good-faith effort to supply people to staff the Office of Civil Operations, even while it reserved proprietary rights over certain agency activities. The agency contribution to OCO staffing

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included Lewis Lapham, an officer with broad covert action experience, who arrived in November 1966 as the station's deputy COS for provincial operations. With his office in OCO, he served concurrently there as chief of cadre operations.⁷⁷

In this role, and recognizing that OCO represented no more than an initial step toward full program integration, Lapham saw some tangible gains in terms of better communication on the American side. One area that profited from the new arrangement was the administration of the police program, in which USOM and the station each had major equities. Lapham was charged both with cooperating on activities of common concern and with preserving station control of intelligence and the C-G and C-T activities. These imperatives were fully compatible, as he saw them; there was nothing in mission pacification policy that would have diverted these assets from the station's objectives for them.⁷⁸

A Defense Department historian saw it differently. In his view, the desire of COS John Hart and local USIS chief Barry Zorthian to maintain their autonomy "meant that CIA and even [USIS] officers in the field often refused to accept any guidance from the OCO representative, and cases began to come to light in which major actions were being initiated by the CIA without any consultation with OCO." If that is what was happening—no specifics accompanied the accusation—it belied headquarters' stated confidence that the station, having "blazed new trails," was a full participant in the new structure. The resulting bureaucratic relationships could not be expected to "contain only sweetness and light," but Helms and Colby expected the station to adapt, remaining "target rather than mechanism oriented." And it appears that Ambassador Porter and OCO staff chief Wade Lathram understood and accepted that Counter-Terror and the Police Special Branch intelligence program were to be housed in OCO "only as a management expedient in directing province operations."⁷⁹

The station worried more about a MACV takeover than about OCO. "If we want to keep [OCO's] sticky mitts off the Special Branch program, it is not advisable that we put any of the Special Branch money into the OCO allotment." The necessity of this tactic was "heightened by [the] danger that at some point [the] military might want to take over [the] entire OCO program." Should this occur, the station wanted "the record to show that the Special Branch program has been handled all along as something of a peculiarly CIA character."⁸⁰

There was nothing fanciful about this perception of military ambition to absorb pacification into MACV, and of civilian vulnerability to being absorbed. A telegram from the commander-in-chief Pacific (CINCPAC) in Honolulu

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referred to the “inability of USAID [parent organization of USOM] and [the station] to provide personnel to influence [the] RD Cadre program at district level and below.” The implication, valid at least in quantitative terms, was that the military did have the personnel. Further, as the Defense Department historian observed, OCO had no committed champion in Washington; even Robert Komer, who “probably contributed more to [OCO’s] achievements than anyone else in Washington,” was “already on the record as favoring a military takeover.” Nevertheless, at the end of 1966, the die was not yet cast, and Porter’s new organization still had time to prove itself.⁸¹

Washington’s impatience was not making life any easier for General Thang. In October, McNamara had publicly criticized the rate of pacification progress. General Thang’s military superiors joined in this disparagement of MRD’s performance, and Thang was not mollified when in November Porter and a visiting Komer assured him of McNamara’s high regard for him. Thang said that even General Thieu, the chief of the Military Directory, had joined in the criticism, and Thang was thinking about giving up. The embassy said it was casting about for a candidate to replace him, but it despaired of finding anyone embodying the same level of “drive and personal integrity.”⁸²

On 7 November, John Hart listened to General Thang’s litany of despair. The problem was not just criticism, nor ARVN failure to protect RD work in the hamlets, but opposition by ARVN colleagues who opposed Thang’s fight to insulate the program from financial corruption. Shrugging off an expression of concern for his own security, Thang said he worried more that, in order to discredit both him and the program, an adversary might accuse him of having taken a bribe.⁸³

Thang’s discouragement reflected also his perception that rapid growth was eroding the program’s quality. Colby wrote to Hart, asking him to assure Thang of the agency’s agreement with his preference for “soundly based progress rather than . . . headlong expansion.” Improved training and more realistic pacification criteria would permit a more measured approach in 1967 than had been pursued in 1966. Thang continued with plans for a major inspection trip, and the station prepared briefing material whose pessimistic tone (“when all of the problems are brought together, the result is a gloomy picture”) may have reinforced the minister’s doubts.⁸⁴

If ARVN failure to provide perimeter security was still endemic, the RD program’s core weakness remained the failure of local leadership. A province-by-province station summary acknowledged the deleterious effects of the Buddhists’ Struggle Movement and of Dai Viet and VNQDD influence in I Corps even as it underlined the spotty quality of management everywhere. An

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uncomprehending or uninterested province chief might ignore the efforts of an energetic district chief, or an ineffective provincial RD committee might fail to support good RDC team leadership, or the nonfeasance of team leaders might subvert the good intentions of province or district chiefs. Almost everywhere, at least one link in the leadership chain was weak if not, for practical purposes, entirely absent. And despite the agency's conceptual leadership in the entire exercise, GVN lapses could be encouraged by a passive or uncomprehending case officer. Thus, instances arose of APA and C-T personnel being used as informants (for the security of the Saigon airport, in one instance), or of APA cadres working in refugee centers.⁸⁵

Other problems, as of late 1966, looked less threatening, even if CIA observers still found them worrisome. Expansion of the C-G program, for example, took it into provinces whose leadership practiced or tolerated the abuses that the grievance aspect of the program was designed to bring to light. One province chief suspended the program after being embarrassed by C-G reports of corruption. The program's very success created a risk, and one agency observer worried that C-G would be "endangered if we place too much emphasis on cleaning up corruption or the province chief is confronted [by Saigon] about corruption in his province." In these circumstances, the integrity and effectiveness of the activity could be assured only if a province case officer was on hand to provide not just advice but "direction for the conduct of the operation."⁸⁶

The pressure on C-G cadres for intelligence production, moreover, sometimes led them to such active elicitation during their interviews that it eroded their standing with the villagers whose goodwill gave the program its intelligence potential. The station may have been inadvertently complicit in this, for the record suggests a cyclical pattern in managerial guidance to field advisers. Census-Grievance advisers who emphasized the service aspect of Census-Grievance, seeking to satisfy the villagers' aspirations and redress their grievances, would find themselves being pressed to increase the intelligence production that this beneficence was supposed to generate. Responding to this, they would tilt the process toward eliciting information, and evidence would accumulate that this emphasis was eroding the incentive for the peasants to cooperate. New guidance would renew the emphasis on services, and the cycle would begin again.⁸⁷

Counter-Terror presented two other, mutually aggravating, difficulties. One was the gradual drift toward conventional operations. As the sole asset available to some district and even province chiefs to mount offensive operations, the C-T unit sometimes grew to the point at which it could operate in

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company strength. Operating in this mode, it substituted for the patrols and ambushes that well-led Regional and Popular Forces would have conducted as a matter of course. Some CIA advisers accepted this practice, presumably on the reasonable ground that somebody had to do it to save the local GVN from supine passivity. A few may have simply enjoyed leading their own small army, and Tom Donohue recalled that the senior agency adviser to III Corps seemed to have been reliving his World War II experiences as an OSS officer with partisan forces in Burma.⁸⁸

C-T deployment in substantial numbers also led to tactical emphasis on attrition, rather than the taking of prisoners for intelligence exploitation, and the high profile of these operations attracted increasing attention from the press. After an early August operation covered by German photographer Horst Faas, the station adopted one palliative when it renamed the C-T team the Provincial Support Unit. The new label was “more acceptable to Gen. Thang who fronts for, and backstops the Station,” and the station hoped it would dampen media interest. On the substantive level, the station acknowledged that intelligence collection had been receiving less attention than perhaps it deserved, despite the fact that “prisoners are obviously of more interest than dead VC.” Henceforth, CIA advisers would aim at exploiting the program’s intelligence potential.⁸⁹

At headquarters, Bill Colby had less confidence than the station in the tranquilizing effect of a name change. He urged the station to transfer C-T management out of OCO’s Cadre Operations Division in order to signal to GVN counterparts that CIA saw the two as unrelated. He acknowledged that rough tactics could not be avoided in a “guerrilla and counter-guerrilla civil war,” but he saw unavoidable flap potential in the possibility that station control might not always ensure “adherence to U.S. standards.” The C-T program should therefore be viewed as a stopgap measure, Colby said, and should be transferred to the GVN’s National Police and the constabulary-like Police Field Force as soon as these organs became adequate to the task.⁹⁰

The station accepted Colby’s argument, and announced that it would move C-T training out of the camp next to the RD Cadre facility at Vung Tau. In October, it renamed the program once more, and the Provincial Support Unit became the Provincial Reconnaissance Unit (PRU). The station also adopted as standard practice a “PRU province control group” composed of the province chief’s representatives and both MACV and station advisers. The station counted on this mechanism to prevent an “unscrupulous province chief” from such misprision as using the PRU to “eliminate his political opposition.” An ill-disposed province or district chief might have bypassed the control group,

Growing Pains

of course, but he risked being informed on by unit members trained, advised, and paid by American advisers, and there is no record of any such malfeasance having come to light.⁹¹

Before the end of 1966, the year already was seen by both U.S. and GVN officials as a preparatory interlude. The change in the military balance imposed by U.S. ground forces had not led to a comparable expansion in the GVN's rural presence. This resulted partly from the limited numbers and uneven quality of the new RDC teams, and partly from inadequate GVN use of its regular and territorial forces to screen pacification teams from communist attack. Nevertheless, both the United States and the GVN were now committed to a single pacification strategy. National training facilities and provincial programs were well established, and ARVN had been assigned a major responsibility for pacification security. The staffing of OCO remained incomplete, and the question of management authority on the U.S. side was still open, but the rest of the framework was in place.⁹²

During the following year, the United States would finally settle the management question as well, placing all pacification activity under a new civilian-run MACV element called Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS).

CHAPTER 11

CORDS

Every American and Vietnamese pacification manager recognized, by late 1966, that accomplishments had failed to match early expectations. Over the course of that year, pacification operations recorded a net gain of just over 400 hamlets, bringing the number of those declared secured to 4,400 of a total of 11,250. This progress represented only a little more than a quarter of the 1966 goal, and the modest scope of the so-called National Priority Areas for 1967 demonstrated the reduced scale of GVN and U.S. pacification objectives. In the five provinces of I Corps, for example, only the area around Da Nang city now qualified for priority treatment. Two districts and parts of two others in Binh Dinh Province constituted the priority area in the vastly larger II Corps area, while in III Corps only Gia Dinh Province, surrounding Saigon, and parts of contiguous provinces were to get special emphasis. Only in IV Corps, portions of which had never hosted a strong insurgent presence and where pacification should therefore be relatively easy, was more than one entire province to get priority attention.¹

Nevertheless, a CIA analysis done at the request of Deputy Defense Secretary Cyrus Vance saw the Viet Cong infrastructure as newly vulnerable. Hanoi's military offensive, launched in late 1964 in hopes of victory before the United States could intervene, had sapped the VCI by drawing guerrillas into main force units. Harsh exactions on the population, with heavy taxation and forced recruitment, and "heavy-handed terrorism" for those who resisted, had accompanied the drive for a military decision, and alienated many of the previously noncommitted. In the wake of allied military victories, the VCI found itself, at least in Annam, "in a weakened and exposed state."²

Even in the Mekong Delta, as much as 50 percent of the VCI and local

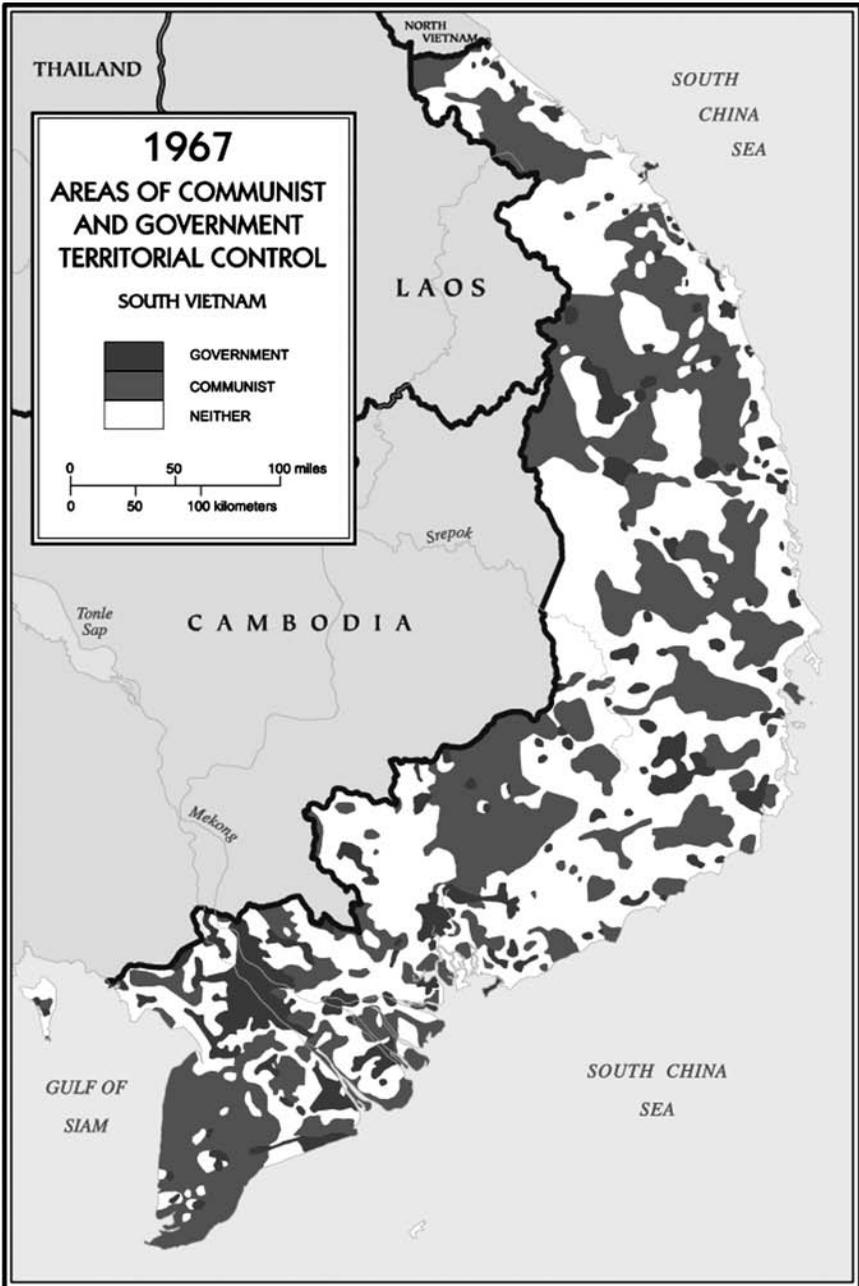
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force leadership had been transferred into main force units. In III Corps and in some lowland portions of II Corps, the VC were calling on women to replace male cadres conscripted into the army. A station analysis of this development concluded that it must already have produced leadership and other weaknesses “which should have been boldly and imaginatively exploited on our side” in order to defeat the resiliency that allowed the VC “to respond, to re-group, to rebuild, and to re-infiltrate.” The station lamented that “we have, unfortunately, not seen enough of this” kind of exploitation, which it thought should emphasize direct attack on VC command elements. Such a campaign would not only produce organizational disruption and personnel and materiel losses, but also generate a destructive atmosphere of betrayal in VC ranks.³

Nevertheless, even if opportunities to weaken the VCI were going unexploited, it appeared to John Hart that demands for support of the main forces had stretched the system beyond its capacity. “Food and manpower,” he wrote, “are inadequate in many areas and, according to recently captured documents, guerrilla forces are shrinking. [Declining] morale is contagious, and the spirit of the political and support forces is suffering along with that of the battered main-force troops.” The COS saw the pacification programs as taking advantage of the more favorable military balance: “The enemy is hurting not just in his main-force military effort, but all down the line.”⁴

But Hart did not argue that the VCI had been crippled, and headquarters agreed. The paper prepared for Deputy Secretary Vance acknowledged that “the timeliness and adequacy of [the communists’] renewed focus on the rural political struggle will be a decisive factor in our own pacification progress this year.” Exploitation of allied gains would require recognition that the underlying aim of “‘People’s War’ is to mobilize the rural populace in order to overthrow the GVN and place the Communist Party in power.” Pacification could succeed only in the form of a countermobilization, with security and development programs viewed not as ends in themselves but as means of “turning the people against the VC and gaining their support for the GVN.”⁵

CIA analyst George Allen noted the asymmetry of the VC’s and GVN’s respective bases of support and the advantage this conferred on the VC. While the VC had replaced traditional local government with “youthful cadre imbued with revolutionary zeal and Marxist ‘scientific’ efficiency,” the GVN relied on an urbanized middle class that viewed GVN corruption and incompetence with “cynicism and scorn.” A successful pacification strategy would have to overcome this disadvantage. It would also have to guarantee the availability of sufficient regular combat forces to deter or defeat attacks on RDC teams that exceeded the teams’ ability to repel.⁶



CIA estimate of areas under government and communist control as of 1967.

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The communists demonstrated that they understood the threat of a GVN countermobilization of the villagers. The battalion attack in Tieu Can District, described earlier, was followed in early February 1967 by a two-battalion North Vietnamese assault on the RF and PF defenders of an area slated for pacification in Quang Tri Province, below the demilitarized zone (DMZ). Good ARVN reaction fended off a disaster, but RD cadres lost 10 killed and 22 wounded or missing. In all, the communists launched 26 attacks on RDC groups in January and 43 in February. Between 1 and 26 March 1967, they conducted 105 attacks, often in company strength. RD casualties in the March incidents included 70 killed, 103 wounded, and 27 missing. Cadre teams under attack put up vigorous resistance, and the embassy noted the importance of this, given that ARVN and the territorial forces, “although deployed in support of RD in many areas, are not yet operating at full effectiveness.”⁷

The VC made their goal explicit in a Liberation Radio broadcast on 3 April that warned that “the enemy is concentrating great efforts on training a group of lackeys, the so-called Pacification . . . Cadres, and organizing them into groups to follow the rebel forces to deceive and repress our population.” Accordingly, Liberation Radio called for “great attention to the destruction of U.S.–Rebel Pacification Groups.” Military attack was supplemented by action against individual pacification cadres. In one instance, four VC infiltrated a hamlet nominally protected by a PF platoon, killed the C-G man—not coincidentally, the embassy reported, “one of the more effective . . . in the province”—and escaped with his records. Four days later, in late June, a similar fate befell a C-G cadre in Bien Hoa.⁸

The GVN, supported by MACV, had traditionally given ARVN first priority on Vietnamese manpower. This inhibited recruiting for the RDC program, whose cadremen remained subject to the draft regardless of the length of their service. Finally, at the height of the attacks on RDC teams, the GVN acknowledged the inherent risk of cadre service. Acting on the logic of its commitment to Revolutionary Development, in mid-April it granted draft exemption to RD cadres who completed their service.⁹

CIA officers and facilities never became the targets of systematic VC violence, but travel in the countryside always incurred some risk. This increased during the communists’ 1967 campaign against the RD cadres. In the most serious incident, a command-detonated mine destroyed the jeep carrying a CIA officer and a Marine officer to an RD project in Quang Tin Province. Both were wounded, and it appeared that only the sandbags on the floor of the vehicle had saved them from being killed.¹⁰

Fragmented Planning

Adoption of the RD cadres as the core of the GVN's pacification strategy did not immediately result in a single, comprehensive pacification plan. As of February 1967, there were two such plans, one a joint effort by MACV and the GVN military and the other produced by General Thang's MRD and the embassy's OCO. As a member of the U.S. Mission Council, the station had to comment on the joint military plan even while it was helping prepare the civilian proposal. Commenting to headquarters on the military's proposal, John Hart noted the presence of most of the generally accepted pacification requirements, but worried that the tone of the document suggested an administrative implementation to be imposed without serious attention to attracting the villagers' active cooperation.¹¹

The station participated much more actively in the civilian effort, apparently drafted in General Thang's MRD, which resulted in conceptual guidelines adopted by both the embassy's OCO and the ministry. One American participant criticized the product, whose prescriptions, even though placed in "an essentially political context," were "diffuse and vague." The tasks included "annihilation of the communist underground" and of "tyrannical [GVN] officials," the "establishment of popular democratic and administrative organizations" to manage the hamlet's participation in the RD process, and the "organization of the population in the struggle against the VC."¹²

The MRD-embassy guidelines did not entirely ignore the question of means, but in their millenarian tone often seemed to understate the obstacles to their achievement. On the question of eradicating the VC infrastructure, for example, the new guidance specified only the need to prepare dossiers on VC cadres. In dealing with abusive GVN officials, the RDC team was to apply moral suasion and patience in hopes that they would change their ways. Failing this, the team's only recourse was an appeal to higher authority, despite the guidelines' explicit acknowledgement of the "solidarity" of corrupt functionaries at different levels.¹³

Organization for hamlet defense included a "popular intelligence network" and a warning system that served a fancifully conceived network of active defense "cells." These would fight "from one position to another, from one defense work to another . . . to demoralize the enemy and wage a war of attrition." And if active defense were impossible, VC attackers should encounter "an absolute quietness reigning over everything . . . and within a short while, our military units [would] come to encircle and attack them."¹⁴

Seven other tasks involved primarily the provision of services. These

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required less heroism, but some of them did call for technical expertise and diplomatic skill. This was true especially of the complicated and delicate issue of land reform. The pacification criteria recognized the need for legislative reform; meanwhile, RDC teams were enjoined to promote the use of formal contracts between tenants and landlords and to tackle such thorny problems as landowner demands for back rents, conflicting claims created by earlier VC redistribution, and the opening to cultivation of unused but privately owned land.¹⁵

These demands reflected the cadres' charter, in 1967, as the official GVN presence in hamlets being reclaimed for the government. The earlier programs, from Force Populaire and Mountain Scouts through Advance Political Action, had been asked to do little more than provide evidence of GVN concern for the villagers' security and well-being. Now, the cadre team was to provide the full range of government services, enlisting the rural population to participate in its own defense and in social and economic development. The role of ARVN was also to be transformed, and Joint General Staff (JGS) chief General Cao Van Vien instructed his commanders to "provide an aggressive military screen for Revolutionary Development, involving night actions, ambushes, patrolling, and . . . civic action."¹⁶

Deputy Ambassador Porter's assistant, Henry Koren, implicitly acknowledged the rigor of this agenda when he noted that the 1967 plan assigned first priority only to "consolidation and development of hamlets already under nominal government control." And the station entertained little hope that General Vien's commitment of fifty maneuver battalions to RDC protection would result in more than a marginally greater ARVN contribution to pacification. Indeed, ARVN's new role might constitute a retrograde move, in the sense that ARVN commanders' amateur tinkering with provincial pacification plans, already seen in two provinces, threatened their practicability.¹⁷

The level of ARVN command interest in pacification could be read in its selection of students for a course in RDC doctrine and practice. Management at the Vung Tau center postponed the session when the twelve liaison officers sent by each of the corps commanders turned out to be unacceptably junior people. Even with this about to be remedied, the station doubted that "what dedicated American advisers have been trying to do for years will suddenly blossom forth under the magic title Revolutionary Development." Nevertheless, civic action training for military units could do nothing but good, and the station thought MACV should concentrate on this rather than aspire to run the cadre program.¹⁸

Whatever the validity of their objections to military management of paci-

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fication, the preference of the U.S. Mission's civilian members for civilian control on a committee basis was already generating predictable tension among advisers in the field. Before the end of 1966, station case officers in ten provinces had already reported serious friction. This they attributed to a MACV "seniority" mentality and to several cases of either unwarranted interference by USOM representatives or, conversely, their refusal to participate at all. Some local GVN officials seemed to be responding to General Thang's appeals for greater involvement in pacification, but this development tended to be offset by increasing turnover in GVN staffing at province and district levels.¹⁹

Agency field operations had their bright and dark spots as well. The Census-Grievance program was working well in most provinces, but provincial misuse of PRU elements for conventional combat operations and for guard duty continued to be "a serious problem," despite the station's action to limit team size. Limited staffing constituted one obstacle to such reforms; with CIA cadre programs active in thirty-nine provinces, the station element running them had only 109 people, 84 of them assigned to the provinces.²⁰

In any case, the agency approach to rural programs in Vietnam had always sought to avoid a conspicuous advisory presence. The station explicitly rejected the tendency of some of its field advisers, exasperated by what struck them as GVN nonfeasance, to take over and do the job themselves. A successful campaign could be implemented only by the Vietnamese, and the American task was to "teach and push" them to solve their own problems. This did not mean that the GVN was to be left to choose which lessons to accept: "By working behind [the] scenes, we have had many dishonest and inefficient GVN personnel removed, particularly in RD, thus we see our role as not merely advisory, except on [the] surface." The station thought MACV ill suited to the discreet manipulation of a politically oriented program, and it feared that the military's assumption of control would be a "severe regressive step."²¹

The problems of designing and administering an effective political-psychological program across a wide cultural divide were enough to daunt any adviser in the field. Ralph Hudson*, the CIA officer assigned to OCO to run cadre operations, acknowledged that the removal of ineffective GVN officials at station behest was as much the exception as the rule. The participation of such people in hiring new cadres was affecting the quality of new recruits, and someone in the provinces had suggested prohibiting the long fingernails affected by cadres drawn from the urban middle class. Hudson saw no way—he did not say why—of enforcing such a mandate on people already on duty. Instead, he urged provincial advisers to ensure that only those applicants be accepted who came "equipped with short fingernails."²²

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Directorate chairman General Nguyen Van Thieu endorsed the RDC program in late February 1967, asserting in a speech at My Tho that the “communists could be defeated in four years if the RD program was intensively carried out. Otherwise the war might last for ten years.” Thirty thousand cadres were too few to do the job by themselves, and Thieu pledged support from the regular army. But the joint military plan committed no specific units to pacification duty. And because many of Thieu’s unit commanders lacked sympathy for the program, or at least for accepting any responsibility for it, their support often remained pro forma. At MACV, General DePuy saw pacification progress as confined to the perimeter of U.S. and South Korean military operations. Where ARVN was responsible for security, he said, “progress has been very modest or non-existent.”²³

The continuing failure to synchronize the work of ARVN and local security forces with that of RDC teams meant, among other things, no assurance of GVN protection for a hamlet, however strong its pro-government sympathies, after the RDC team moved on. In addition, only 4 percent of the USOM budget came under OCO control, and this hindered planning for U.S. follow-up after pacification. In April, according to a CIA visitor from Washington, OCO was still trying “to determine what should be done after the RD Cadre leave a hamlet.”²⁴

This dilemma represented in part the fruit of Hanoi’s current strategy. The North Vietnamese leadership assumed that, in order to succeed, U.S. and ARVN forces would need simultaneously to protect pacification and defeat the communists’ regulars. To thwart this, the regulars would avoid any decisive confrontation, forcing the allies to disperse their forces to meet widespread guerrilla attacks. A MACV intelligence study recognized the problem: communist main force units would also invite contact in areas of low population density such as the demilitarized zone and the Central Highlands, “thereby preventing adequate protection for the pacification program in the lowland and delta regions. The same plan was employed successfully against the French between 1946 and 1954.” Unified pacification management, however badly needed, could not resolve this quandary.²⁵

The End of Civilian Counterinsurgency Management

In February 1967, a third of OCO’s staff positions were still vacant. As already noted, Komer had for some time favored bringing the vastly larger resources of MACV into the service of pacification, and what looked to him like the glacial pace of OCO development led him to think that MACV should now simply

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take over. Having been converted to this view, President Johnson appointed Komer on 9 May as General Westmoreland's deputy for pacification. At the same time, Johnson accepted Ambassador Lodge's resignation, and replaced him with Ellsworth Bunker, an elderly but energetic and decisive businessman turned diplomat who had served as ambassador in Buenos Aires, New Delhi, and Rome. Also at the same time, General Creighton Abrams arrived to become Westmoreland's deputy at MACV. Both Ambassador Porter and the station's primary DCOS, Robert Porter, left Saigon, and Lewis Lapham became John Hart's sole deputy.²⁶

Komer's preference for military management of pacification reflected two beliefs. He had "long held that local security was paramount to pacification." Accordingly, faced with intractable obstacles to accelerating the growth of the RD cadres, he saw the Regional and Popular Forces as "a quicker and easier way to expand the scope of pacification operations." Westmoreland, never himself greatly involved in the pacification issue, acceded to this view, and made Komer the manager of U.S. support to the RF and PF. He also shared Komer's belief in the need to expand the advisory effort down to the district level, and to use MACV personnel to staff it.²⁷

President Johnson's National Security Action Memorandum 362 of 9 May set up Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) as an element of MACV. CIA Headquarters responded with a cable to Saigon saying that the agency would meet any call upon its resources, and it exhorted the station to join in supporting "the letter and spirit of the President's directive." Lapham should ensure that all station officers understood headquarters' commitment to "aggressive compliance and full commitment to the Revolutionary Development and pacification task."²⁸

Before taking up his post in Saigon, which carried the personal rank of ambassador, Robert Komer had told President Johnson that "by this time next year we can break the back of the VC in South Vietnam—even if the war continues." And there could be no doubt that a better-synchronized American approach to pacification, and the presumptive influence of this on GVN and ARVN efforts, would improve the odds.²⁹

Nevertheless, the creation of CORDS and the appointment of a manager, even one as forceful as Robert Komer, did not guarantee a fully coherent program. Although not only Komer but also General Thang saw the Regional and Popular Forces as vital to pacification, their chain of command continued to run from the Joint General Staff down through the tactical commands at corps and division level. Each of these had MACV advisers reporting through the military side of MACV. The CORDS-Thang supervisory role came into play

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only at the province and district level. Here the MACV advisory teams, averaging only four men each at the district level, were too small to affect significantly the quality of the 20 Regional Forces companies and 100 Popular Forces platoons in the average province. And there was tension within MACV, with some corps advisers demanding the return of province teams to their control “to unify the military advisory chain of command.” Komer succeeded in fending this off, but the bifurcated command line endured as a continuing source of confusion.³⁰

In Washington, Bill Colby saw the potentially conflicting sides of a larger military role in pacification. On the one hand, it promised better security for RDC teams and other pacification efforts. On the other, it threatened to weaken the political thrust of Revolutionary Development. A month after Komer’s appointment, Colby obliquely warned the station to resist any trend toward militarizing the pacification process: “an intense effort will be necessary among Americans as well as Vietnamese to maintain and increase the political nature of the RD teams’ work, rallying the population, establishing human contact with them, inspiring popular initiative and bringing the government’s services to an organized and committed people.”³¹

DCOS Lew Lapham, replying for the station, emphasized his determination to preserve Revolutionary Development as a civilian and essentially Vietnamese enterprise. Vietnamese management would be threatened by an “overwhelming American presence,” but Lapham expected the station’s low-key style to keep the GVN actively engaged. With respect to the infusion of military personnel into the station’s little band of cadre advisers, Komer had not suggested to Lapham that this implied a MACV ability to run the CIA programs. On the contrary, Lapham said, Komer showed a “strong disposition” to leave the agency in charge of them. Nominal subordination to CORDS had produced no “pressure to make changes which would do violence to the security and integrity of our programs. . . . There is no doubt about who will be in charge—we will.” Census-Grievance, Provincial Reconnaissance Units, and intelligence liaison with the police should remain indefinitely under station management, Lapham thought, and the station element in CORDS would have to run even the RDC program for at least another two years.³²

Whatever the future CIA role, the CORDS charter was substantially broader than the station’s. Of the eight projects on Komer’s initial agenda, the station had a direct but in no case exclusive part in four: an attack on the VC infrastructure, RDC program expansion, modernization of the police force, and pacification planning for 1968. It had only peripheral responsibilities for the other four items: expansion of the program to generate VC defections

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(Chieu Hoi, or Open Arms), improved refugee handling, more ARVN support to pacification, and new emphasis on land reform. In the provinces, especially, the station's restricted participation and its modest advisory presence made it something of a junior partner on the American team.³³

Lapham took note of this somewhat indeterminate status. He pointed out to Colby that, although all U.S. command levels accepted direct CIA access to GVN provincial officials concerned with station programs, "personalities on both the Vietnamese and the American side do influence the operational effectiveness of the relationships." And every provincial CIA representative had both a civilian and a military superior in the local CORDS office. But Lapham regarded the overall effect of CORDS management as salutary. Although OCO had made real advances, working-level links to MACV had never matured, especially in Saigon. "Whatever his faults may be, Mr. Komer is changing all of this very rapidly," and the DCOS saw in this an opportunity to sell the station's convictions on the need for hamlet self-defense forces and better security for rural cadre operations.³⁴

As might be expected, the working level reacted somewhat less serenely to the imposition of the CORDS structure. The station's regional officer in charge (ROIC) for III Corps, based at Bien Hoa, described the CORDS approach to CIA's provincial officers as one of simultaneous dependence on their expertise and undermining of their position. "On the one hand we have the Deputy [corps adviser for CORDS] and his Senior Province Advisers seeking our assistance at every turn on planning, infrastructure, and Revolutionary Development." The agency people, giving what advice they could, found the unquestioning acceptance of this advice "a little frightening sometimes because in some of these fields we are not even good amateurs, like artillery planning."³⁵

"On the other hand," the ROIC continued, "there is a constant undermining of our position," with CORDS officials trying to control the movement of his people and to "scoop us and brag about their own sources being better than ours." At the latter they might eventually succeed, in the ROIC's view, because "we are so busy with the things they should have been doing all along that we aren't able to get to our own basic business."³⁶

The Problem of RDC Attrition

So long as CIA officers in CORDS had the primary responsibility on the U.S. side for cadre management, the problem of cadre attrition constituted one of these items of basic business. Occupying a working-level desk at headquarters, where he read all the monthly reports from Saigon, John O'Reilly spotted an

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alarming increase in noncombat RDC attrition in early 1967. Within a month of graduation from Vung Tau, “half of them would be gone.” O’Reilly flagged this for his superiors in FE Division’s Vietnam Operations branch (VNO), but got no response. He inferred that intense pressure for results coming from Komer, still at the White House, inhibited VNO chief Douglas Blaufarb from highlighting so explosive an issue as generally poor cadre morale.³⁷

Convinced of the need to get policy-level attention to the matter, O’Reilly alerted the Intelligence Directorate’s pacification analyst, who outlined the problem in an article for a classified periodical. Bill Colby waved it around at a staff meeting on Vietnam, wanting to know how much there was to it. Blaufarb dismissed it as overstated, and Colby turned to O’Reilly, who supported it with statistics. O’Reilly suffered no reprisal for this—Blaufarb may actually have been relieved to see the issue surfaced—but mere recognition did not by itself promise a solution. Some progress came in April, when the station and General Thang finally won a draft deferment for RD cadres serving six years. The Americans and the Vietnamese agreed on the need to pay a combined subsistence and risk allowance, and began a joint search for the necessary funds.³⁸

As the benefits became more attractive, Thang accelerated the pace of recruitment; he and his advisers hoped to have 46,000 RD cadres on the rolls by mid-1968. But attrition continued to rise. Estimates varied, but in August the station put it at an annual rate of 35 percent. A month later, an estimate based on more recent but less comprehensive data found the rate approaching 67 percent, with average length of service less than a year. At even a 50 percent annual rate, this study noted, the average cadre would last just one year, and would be lost to the program just when he or she had acquired enough experience to be useful.³⁹

Of those remaining on the rolls, some showed up for duty only on payday, for as late as September 1967, MRD instructions did not provide for docking the pay of absentees. In any case, shirkers often acted in collusion with their provincial supervisors, who would pocket the pay and allowances of cadres who then went home to enjoy their immunity from the draft. The station had not determined the extent of this practice, but took it for granted that even a small amount of such speculation risked serious damage to the morale of cadres present for duty. The station implored the MRD to tighten up its procedures, and in fact this complaint disappears from the record after the fall of 1967.⁴⁰

The attrition problem, however, did not disappear. Colonel Vo Dai Khoi, who had replaced Tran Ngoc Chau as head of cadres in MRD, cited four rea-

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sons for it: a tight labor market caused partly by the lure of jobs with American contractors; the inability of urban-bred cadres to endure hamlet life; mediocre, indifferent, and “frequently corrupt district and provincial officials”; and poor protection by ARVN units suffering from wounded pride over assignment to pacification duty. The security problem meant significant and sometimes demoralizing RD Cadre losses to the VC. Even the favorable casualty ratio in August—the RD groups reported killing 129 VC while losing 64 dead—meant that the cadres were trying to provide essentially civilian services while, at least in some locales, fighting for survival.⁴¹

Persistent cadre attrition exemplified the difficulty that had always attended the expansion of the agency’s counterinsurgency or pacification initiatives in South Vietnam. Small-scale experiments worked well, but had to be expanded if they were to have a decisive effect. But no sooner did programs grow, necessarily with increased GVN participation, than they took on the coloration of the Vietnamese bureaucracy they were intended to bypass. This horrid cycle produced considerable frustration, and the normally collaborative tone of station advice to the GVN occasionally gave way to something more nearly peremptory.

A CORDS memorandum, probably written by Ralph Hudson, opened by telling cadre chief Colonel Khoi that “we would like to have the RD Cadre Directorate or the JGS issue a very short and very clear directive on steps to be taken to cut down on the attrition rate.” Leaving nothing to the Vietnamese imagination, the memorandum went on to specify the eleven points that should be “clearly and precisely set forth.” These included subjecting cadres to the military justice system; holding every cadreman’s national identification card, issuing an RDC card in exchange; and more rigorous applicant screening and medical disability evaluation. At the same time, CORDS wanted a liberalized leave policy for RD cadres and the assurance that all of them would be assigned to hamlets in their home districts.⁴²

A Scarcity of Leaders

Among the numerous causes of excessive cadre attrition was the perennial problem of RDC program leadership. Perhaps the program’s single most intractable weakness, it made itself felt at all levels. General Thieu and Prime Minister Ky periodically endorsed the program, but took no steps to advance it that would risk antagonizing their ARVN constituency. The pro forma quality of their commitment meant that, as of 1967, the program lacked the truly committed support of any influential national-level figure other than the minister of

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Revolutionary Development, General Thang. Thang saw the corps commanders as “basically hostile to the program,” and late in the year he said he had demanded that Thieu remove two of them as a condition of his continuing to run RDC and the territorial forces.⁴³

Thang thought it futile to improve the selection and training of district and province chiefs in the absence of action by General Thieu to limit corruption. Colonel Be made a similar point in a December briefing of Vice President Hubert Humphrey. In a display of candor that the station feared would get him in trouble with his GVN superiors, Be cited corruption and lack of leadership at the province and district levels as the major obstacles to RDC success. Effective team deployment got no help, either, from the Central Revolutionary Development Councils, created to coordinate the interministerial aspects of the cadre program in Saigon and at corps and province levels. At the end of 1967, these organs still reflected, in their indecisiveness and lack of coordination, the sclerotic style of their parent ministries.⁴⁴

A different problem afflicted the selection of RD team leaders. Hudson, the station's liaison with the MRD, complained to Khoi in October 1967 that personal connections too often replaced leadership ability as the operative criterion. He asked that MRD adopt a policy of choosing among deserving cadres already on the rolls; this would, he thought, be “truly socially revolutionary.” To what extent Colonel Khoi or any other of the station's counterparts, other than Nguyen Be, found the prospect of true social revolution anything but repugnant is not known. It is clear, however, that the GVN at all levels assigned a lower priority to developing and empowering local government than did CIA and other CORDS advisers.⁴⁵

In one area, American pressure made what was surely a decisive difference. The station's earlier experience had persuaded it of the need to recruit villagers, not city folk, to work with villagers. It did this in its own programs, but the absorption of employees from the established ministries into the new Revolutionary Development Cadre team in early 1966 resulted in a ratio of seven city-bred cadres for every three from the country. By September 1967, this ratio had been more than reversed, and for every urban cadre there were three from the countryside. The station had learned, however, that farm boys usually displayed little capacity to exercise authority, and this otherwise salutary emphasis on employing villagers to work with villagers brought the leadership question back to the fore. This was remediable, or so it was hoped, and by the late summer of 1967 a twelve-week leadership training course at Vung Tau had produced 600 graduates, with 1,100 more expected by the end of the year.⁴⁶

Not even this refinement went as far as some of the U.S. advisers at Vung

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Tau thought necessary. In September, James Keyes of USOM compared basic training in the U.S. Army with the cadre training regime at Vung Tau. Where the American recruit received thirteen weeks of preparation to work under professional officers and NCOs, the Revolutionary Development Cadre had only twelve weeks' instruction "in areas where even the instructors may not be qualified." The cadres were then dispatched to the provinces "under very loose supervision where they are expected to perform like sophisticated social reformers." Instead, working as they often did under indifferent or uncomprehending district chiefs, "groups and team leaders often give the impression of the blind leading the blind." Keyes thought it "obvious that we are training the wrong people; instead of training masses of cadres, we should concentrate on small groups of instructors."⁴⁷

Keyes wanted better training of instructors and various other reforms, but he left open the perennially troubled question of the political content of Vung Tau training. The station's Ralph Johnson, writing at the same time, noted that not even Major Mai's cadre indoctrination had been based on any "overall political action concept" offering a coherent "response to the villagers' aspirations" and an answer to the VC program.⁴⁸

Although it had never developed such a concept itself, the station was unhappy with Major Nguyen Be when he undertook to revise the political part of the syllabus without consulting his advisers. This undoubtedly reflected some wounded vanity, but the substance of Be's revisions also contributed to the station's unease. The political structure Be recommended, based on national leadership drawn from elected hamlet chiefs, would have replaced the same GVN whose claim to legitimacy had always constituted the formal basis for U.S. support of the struggle against the Viet Cong. Far more radical than anything ever proposed by his predecessor, Major Mai, or by Colonel Chau, Be's formulation carried to its logical conclusion the redistributive bias of the CIA programs. Be's implicit repudiation of the GVN helps explain why the station always shrank from articulating or even recognizing the political goals implicit in its own practice. Be had, in effect, presumed to translate "Revolutionary Development" into Vietnamese, and the disquieting implications of his effort had to be and were simply ignored.⁴⁹

In September 1967, the station directly addressed the irreducible tension between the drive for short-term results and the long-range imperative to find or create adequate Vietnamese leadership. Walter Roberts*, the senior station adviser at III Corps Headquarters in Bien Hoa, addressed a conference of station officers and his regional counterparts with an unblinking statement of the problem: "Better leadership of the RD Cadre program can be obtained

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only through the recognition that it is not a short-term crash program.” Roberts rehearsed leadership shortcomings at all levels, from the near absence of MRD control of cadre operations in the field to the indifference, incompetence, even misfeasance, of province and district chiefs and RD control group supervisors.⁵⁰

Roberts proposed to develop indigenous leadership through more rigorous supervision by the ministry. At levels below Saigon, he wanted a more logical command chain and better education of supervisors, including the compulsory training for province and district chiefs, which had fallen into desuetude soon after being introduced in 1966. But General Thang’s personal example had “not been contagious” even among ministry officials in Saigon. Supervisory failures there left no recourse but to “demand that the [MRD] be capable of insuring that lesser officials in all levels of the RDC program be made to execute the tasks . . . for which they are being paid.” Roberts did not shrink from the implication that “if need be we should put an American at the top level who will insist on the foregoing even to the extent of withholding funds should the [Ministry] not come through in the expected manner.”⁵¹

Roberts did not ask whether such coercive pressure would be compatible with the growth of the indigenous leadership he saw as essential to long-term success. Ralph Hudson, in Saigon, addressed this when he sent Roberts’s text to headquarters: until the Vietnamese took charge of pacification, “we will not be able to get out of this country.” And persuasion, he said, was the only way to achieve more GVN involvement, even if this meant accepting some inefficiency and speculation, for “we cannot involve the Vietnamese by fiat.” Hudson went on to acknowledge the justice of Roberts’s complaints—they were echoed by the other ROICs—and recognized as a particularly dangerous weakness the redeployment of RDC teams (now officially known as RDC groups) from hamlets still lacking either a self-defense force or a residual GVN presence.⁵²

Hamlet self-defense and a permanent GVN presence constituted “two essentials we have been hollering about for months,” Hudson wrote, and their continued absence raised the question whether gentle persuasion as an approach to improving GVN management was going to work. Hudson circled the issue in gingerly fashion, noting that the “honest, willing and able leadership layer at the MRD is eggshell thin.” After saying that the problems looked “insurmountable,” he forbore to draw the obvious conclusion, ending instead on a hortatory note: “in this country we must remain positive.” The result was that Hudson and Roberts each dealt with only one horn of the dilemma, and thus escaped having to recognize their quandary. Neither they nor anyone else whose views survive in the record explicitly questioned the future of

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a program on which an indispensable degree of American influence could be achieved only by sacrificing the development of a competent, self-motivated GVN management.⁵³

That failed Vietnamese leadership represented, if not the rule, not a rarity either, emerges in a barrage of station complaints to Colonel Khoi in late 1967. In Quang Tin Province, for example, within a few months of the arrival of an unusually energetic and dedicated provincial RD supervisor, the most insecure province in I Corps had acquired an excellent cadre staff, and the program was suddenly making rapid gains. The GVN then summarily removed the control group leader and all forty-four people on his staff, and installed a warrant officer of local origin whose corrupt father had presumably bought the position for him. Hudson reproached Colonel Khoi for allowing the RDC program to practice “the Mandarin tactics of the past” and in so doing to forfeit the support of the population it wanted to reclaim for the GVN.⁵⁴

In other complaints, Hudson described ARVN nonfeasance in Long An Province, absenteeism and rigidly bureaucratic RD administration in already-pacified An Giang, and poor security practice there and in Sa Dec and Quang Tin. Provincial leadership in Binh Dinh tolerated a team “staffed by a considerable number of undesirables” that failed even to return VC harassing fire. The Ninh Thuan province chief refused to release CORDS-supplied trucks for RD; the program in all of Kontum Province and Dalat City was nearly dormant; and Quang Nam suffered from featherbedding at province headquarters and from a failure to supervise or protect RD groups in the field. Progress in Go Cong was stymied by an inept province chief who had announced his intention to “divorce himself from the RD program.” Phong Dinh Province, in the heart of the Mekong Delta, enjoyed one competent RD manager, but the others were variously “uninspired and unimaginative” and in one case alcoholic. Management turnover in Phu Yen, aggravated by heightened VC opposition, had brought the program there to a near halt.⁵⁵

Hudson acknowledged gratifying progress in a few places: Quang Tri, despite a high (presumably noncombat) cadre attrition rate; Binh Duong, where an energetic province chief was getting things done despite a self-serving resident division commander; and Kien Tuong, where the provincial program was moving ahead despite the uncooperative attitude of two district chiefs. Nevertheless, Hudson worried about a tendency for RD groups to become “59-man labor gangs,” slighting organizational work in favor of construction projects. He pointed out the role of forced labor in the demise of Ngo Dinh Diem’s Strategic Hamlets and urged Khoi to prevent a repetition of this mistake.⁵⁶

Walter Roberts’s paper for the regional conference acknowledged that

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leadership failures were not always chargeable to the Vietnamese. He cited U.S. passivity in the face of the pro forma MRD inspection system and American acquiescence in the fanciful pacification criteria promulgated for 1967. Goals like “annihilation of corrupt officials” and “abolishing hatreds” were “too nebulous,” and land reform and social services requirements exceeded RDC capabilities and the receptiveness of the villagers. “It is doubtful that given an honest inspection system and using present criteria, if Washington, D.C., could qualify as an Ap Doi Moi [a fully pacified Real New Life Hamlet].”⁵⁷

Bill Colby’s reply, which dealt also with analogous problems in the police, offered the hope that the “manipulative capability of CIA” might allow it to help improve ministerial supervision over local programs while protecting local leadership from rigid or arbitrary direction from Saigon. “If the [CORDS] officer acts as an inspector for the national leadership against abuses by the locals, but also provides a channel for the local leadership to appeal for modification of [unrealistic policy guidance], then the American influence can be critical but at the same time discreet.” About the problem of the national leadership itself, Colby was silent.⁵⁸

The Argument over Hamlet Self-Defense

One issue found Hudson and the field officers in full accord. Although the 1967 ministry plan emphasized consolidation of pacified hamlets, as of September all of CIA’s regional officers believed that the cadre program was again being pushed too fast to achieve durable results. Both the station and the ROICs thought it destructive to move cadre groups to new hamlets on a fixed schedule, with Hudson citing insufficient political activity and the regional chiefs pointing to the failure to back up the “oil-spot” theory with effective hamlet defense. But “topside management,” in Hudson’s view, remained more concerned with the pace of cadre activity than with the fragility of recent progress. He did not specify GVN leadership in this connection, and presumably had his CORDS supervisors in mind. Colby’s reply did not address this point.⁵⁹

At least one observer, probably at headquarters, thought the ROICs’ comments “over-balanced on the negative side.” It is unlikely that the ROICs would have overlooked any grounds for optimism—careers are built on success, or at least on the appearance of success. Nevertheless, some at headquarters held that many a completed hamlet suffered no loss of security when its RDC group moved on to an adjacent hamlet. To these observers, the redeployment deplored by the station as premature looked more like a sensible reaction to tardy MRD certification of completed assignments. The notion that an

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RDC group in one hamlet would prevent the VC from harassing or infiltrating another some hundreds of yards away looks in retrospect simply frivolous, but it may have had a basis in experience that headquarters failed to specify. With respect to premature redeployments, a few of them, at least, presumably were driven simply by a tardy certification procedure, but the regions could hardly have been unaware of this in their evaluations of hamlet security.⁶⁰

This difference of opinion over hamlet security was no mere quibble, for CIA and State Department officials had for years regarded a well-trained and motivated hamlet self-defense force as the definitive proof of successful pacification. The debate taking place in fall 1967 reflected the fact that few hamlets were then receiving weapons and training to take up the local security function performed by the RDC group during the six months or so of its deployment. The ROICs blamed this failure to replace the RD cadres with a hamlet self-defense unit on the province chiefs, who either distrusted the villagers and consciously avoided arming them, or were unaware of their own authority to provide weapons. As for help from reaction forces, the advisers repeated the complaint, chronic since 1954, about the preference of ARVN and the Regional and Popular Forces to hole up at night in their “fortress-type positions” rather than go out on patrol in search of the enemy.⁶¹

Lew Lapham had already asserted the fundamental importance of hamlet self-defense, telling headquarters in July that “we must force MACV to arm the hamlet . . . forces that the RD cadres have trained.” Otherwise, “the pacification effort is doomed to failure. We must overcome MACV suspicion of an unconventional force [and achieve] 100 percent participation of hamlet residents.” In the face of GVN and MACV opposition, frustrated CIA officers indulged in a brief flirtation with the idea of passive defense. One formulation envisioned an “alert warning network” used to “exfiltrate the people’s elected leaders and their families, . . . for it is they who are usually the targets of the VC’s ‘selective’ terror.”⁶²

To articulate such a defeatist tactic was to demonstrate its emptiness, and the station returned to its advocacy of the volunteer hamlet militia. “We have long envisioned [it as a] mechanism . . . through which we could . . . construct nation building institutions in the countryside, from the hamlets up, avoiding the corruption that usually goes with institutions . . . built from Saigon down.” But JGS chief General Cao Van Vien and General Thang signed a ludicrously complicated protocol for arming self-defense units—it involved even the Ministry of Youth—which seemed to the station “designed to prevent the arming of the militia rather than to assist it.” In any case, no source of weapons for it had yet been designated. Although the Mission Council and the GVN had

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approved the militia concept in 1966, CORDS and the military side of MACV each wanted the other to accept the logistic responsibility.⁶³

In October, apparently confident of a favorable outcome to the logistic issue—some weapons had been found for existing volunteer militias—Ralph Hudson wrote to Colonel Khoi to deplore the poor case for these volunteers being made by the ministry's delegates to the four corps commanders. He rejected the argument that weapons given to militiamen would fall into VC hands; preventing this, he asserted, was simply a matter of proper training. And he dismissed the suggestion that militia members should be paid, calling it “a sad commentary on the motivational work of the RD Cadres and . . . on the manhood of those who will not fight to save their own family, home, and friends.” This overwrought language probably reflected more frustration than reflection, but Hudson's conclusion was unexceptionable: losing a pacified hamlet to the VC for lack of local defenders was worse than not having sent in an RDC group in the first place.⁶⁴

In December, the GVN simplified somewhat the procedure for weapons distribution, devolving it to corps level and eliminating the Saigon ministries. But the station saw other and even more stubborn problems threatening the formation of new groups and the effectiveness of those already in being. The competence of RDC groups as trainers, the capacity of ARVN logistics, villager reluctance to take the risks of participation, local GVN administrative weakness, and the selection of suitable hamlets all constituted potential stumbling blocks. As U.S. officials always did in these situations, those promoting hamlet self-defense counted on the American advisory presence to offset GVN shortcomings during implementation. District-level advisers who understood “the importance of voluntary participation by the people and selectivity on the part of local officials” when choosing hamlets to be armed would make the program work.⁶⁵

The nomenclature now changed again, becoming simpler even as the planning grew more ambitious. Now in command of both the RDC groups and the Regional and Popular Forces, General Thang proposed to integrate the PF into the pacification scheme, training 35,000 of them as RD cadres in 1968 in order to double the program's strength. By pursuing this approach through 1969, Thang expected pacification-trained PF essentially to replace the RD cadres by 1970.⁶⁶

Implementation would make Thang the personification of the GVN presence in the countryside. But the station either perceived no self-aggrandizing motive in Thang's proposal or thought the possibility unworthy of comment. Instead, it supported him in an oddly worded dispatch that asserted the need to

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have RD cadres follow “every free world military sweep to occupy the hamlets and hold them for the GVN.” The station cannot have intended to reduce the RDC program to an auxiliary of the military; indeed, it assured headquarters that its support for a larger Popular Forces role was intended only to “leaven the PF loaf [with Revolutionary Development Cadre] rather than to have the RD Cadre swallowed by the larger PF loaf.” Accordingly, it proposed to let Thang send 1,000 trainees to Vung Tau and dispatch Vung Tau instructors to PF camps.⁶⁷

Whatever its theoretical merits—it certainly ran the risk of a diluted political and civic action dimension—the proposed transformation of the pacification apparatus depended on a more or less stable level of conflict with the communists. This condition was not to be granted, as the enemy’s massive Tet offensive of late January 1968 was at this point only a month away. At the end of 1967, the hamlet militia were far from ready to help resist a nationwide communist offensive; some 20,000 had been trained, but only 3,000 weapons had been issued, and the security of most GVN-controlled hamlets remained in the hands of the regular and territorial forces. At the beginning of 1968, President Thieu questioned the practice of stationing a five-man cadre team to oversee the volunteer militia in a newly pacified hamlet, and headquarters worried that this might signal some GVN hostility to the militia program as a whole.⁶⁸

Some Provincial Operations under CORDS

The creation of CORDS brought no major conceptual or program innovations. Robert Komer’s emphasis on physical security permitted a larger pacification role for the territorial Regional and Popular Forces, but the coordinated deployment of resources remained the heart of the CORDS process. Rather than look for program innovations, Komer focused his efforts on improving the process of consolidating and replicating current local successes. As of late 1967, Tieu Can District in Vinh Binh remained perhaps the most dramatic example of pacification progress. A popular will to resist, generated and supported by good Vietnamese leadership and a concentrated application of U.S. and GVN resources, succeeded in repelling one communist infantry assault after another. The absence of any apparent sense of positive attachment to the GVN did not, in the circumstances, attract any attention.

What did attract attention was the problem of replicating success, even in adjacent districts. General Thang insisted on challenging the VC hold on Cang Long District, abutting Tieu Can on the north. The deployment of two ARVN battalions, three RF companies, plus PF and police elements, did not by itself

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win over the population, described by the station as “at best neutral toward the government and at worst, active supporters or members of the VC.” The pacification campaign in Cang Long had almost no able-bodied men to work with, and ARVN performance was poor. Nevertheless, after a slow start in late 1966, the economy had gradually revived, and by late 1967 local recruitment of RD cadres had substantially increased. But despite these favorable signs, the “uncertain” motivation of the Cang Long villagers dictated caution. Headquarters recognized that “the true test” of the pacification campaign there “will come in 1968 after the withdrawal of the RD teams and ARVN battalions.”⁶⁹

Although problem areas still abounded, Tieu Can did not represent the only success story in the first months of the CORDS regime. Quang Tri Province provided another, of a very different kind. There, with allied forces protecting RD hamlets from the North Vietnamese infantry based in the nearby hills, CIA advisers inspired a series of “town meetings” that drew the active participation of both provincial and local officials and the villagers they served. One of the first sessions, in the early fall of 1967, attracted the district chief, the village and hamlet chiefs, and members of the Revolutionary Development Council as well as U.S. advisers. By December, the case officer could record the gratifying experience of seeing the previously indifferent provincial RD Cadre chief taking the activity under his wing. Despite heavy weather and a transportation shortage, seventy people showed up for a meeting the cadre chief sponsored without advisory help or encouragement. And he had already started planning the next session, in a different hamlet.⁷⁰

By January 1968, the CIA-run cadre office at CORDS saw the town meeting as an antidote to endemic confusion about the scheduling and implementation of hamlet development projects. Engaging people at all levels, from provincial officials to hamlet elders, it enhanced GVN accountability and efficiency. To the station, the town meeting represented an exciting exercise in local democratic government, one worth emulating elsewhere.⁷¹

At the opposite end of the scale, the managerial refinements that constituted the CORDS approach encountered the same obstacles that had chronically bedeviled the programs from their inception. The dispirited agency adviser in An Xuyen Province, at the tip of the Camau peninsula, reported corruption in the RD Cadre office involving ghost employees on the payroll. One RDC group had reacted lethargically to an unenthusiastic reception in its assigned hamlet, hamlet security was generally poor, and local militias remained for the most part unarmed. Provincial GVN reporting was making false claims of pacification progress, and land reform meant “VC land . . . parceled out . . . unfortunately . . . to influential persons in the hamlet.” Even the Census-Grievance

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program, a model of efficiency, was becoming the “best organized political machine in An Xuyen.” Support from the local C-G office would soon be a condition of election to office, and “this leads to . . . corruption also.” In the midst of all this, the various local American advisers were still not communicating among themselves, even under CORDS.⁷²

Also on the decline, in the fall of 1967, was the pacification effort in Binh Dinh Province. Strategically important for its rice production and politically important for its heavily populated coastal districts, Binh Dinh had been a target of the communist drive in early 1965 to cut South Vietnam in two. The massive allied military reaction to that challenge destroyed much of the enemy military presence in substantial areas while it expelled the rest, and the province enjoyed a high priority for RD group deployments. By June 1967, some 2,000 RD cadres were working in Binh Dinh, which also hosted one of the few functioning hamlet militias, and RDC supervisors had earned high marks for motivation and competence.⁷³

By late September, however, the program had come almost to a halt. Headquarters saw numerous contributing factors: uncertainty following the removal of the province chief; commodity shortages for RDC projects; tardy inspection of pacified hamlets, which delayed the redeployment of RDC groups; weak support from the provincial services; and high cadre attrition. But the key issue, as always, was leadership. The Binh Dinh program had prospered under an indifferent province chief because of the exceptional quality of his cadre chief, a lieutenant named Tran Ngoc Sang. With Sang’s transfer to Pleiku Province, the Binh Dinh program no longer even disciplined its RDC deserters, and some of those who remained had been diverted to work on the presidential election campaign.⁷⁴

Two men acquired key roles after Lieutenant Sang’s departure, a Major Phan Van Phu as provincial RD Council chief, and a civilian, Tran Huu Thich, as the principal RDC administrative official. The station reported that Phu “was rated by U.S. advisers as unqualified and incompetent,” and Thich was a “political hack who had no previous involvement in RD and no interest in it.” As of late 1967, only the province and district capitals and the two major highways were secure. CIA still saw reason for hope in the continued presence of some proven, dedicated cadres and in the formation of mobile inspection teams with adviser participation. But the station made it plain to Colonel Khoi, at MRD, that the “deadwood” would have to go if the program were to be revived.⁷⁵

In the Delta province of Chuong Thien, the CIA cadre officer faced the question of the durability even of apparently successful pacification, and the associated problem of cadre tenure in an assigned hamlet. He deplored what

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he and the province chief saw as premature withdrawal of RDC groups absent a “political organization within the hamlet and . . . a positive GVN civil apparatus to take the place of the RD Cadres.” Even with the cadres still present, “the VC were already moving back.”⁷⁶

The passivity of the villagers aggravated the problem. The station said that there was typically “no response of any kind [to VC-initiated incidents] on the part of the people to either resist or even to notify the GVN.” Three arsonists in one hamlet turned out to be resident Viet Cong who had remained there to sabotage the pacification process. A VC arrested in another hamlet (apparently by CIA-supported cadres, for he was turned over to the province case officer) implicated several others, one of them a member of the new hamlet militia. According to the prisoner, this represented a concerted VC effort to “penetrate the various RD programs,” especially the militia.⁷⁷

The captured VC claimed to know nothing of the Communist Party’s political organization in the hamlet, but the case officer took its presence as a given, concluding that “the VC have already started operating a shadow government in the Ap Doi Mois [pacified hamlets].” Like most of his colleagues, the case officer saw this as a matter of “threats and coercion because the people know that the GVN is incapable of providing the necessary security.” But he also acknowledged the opportunity presented to the VC by the “vacuum left by the lack of a hamlet political organization. This is a direct result of . . . moving teams before political cohesion could be accomplished.” What might serve as the basis of such cohesion he did not say, but, again like many of his colleagues, he assumed the need for a positive GVN program to defeat an enemy whose own influence was often asserted to rest entirely on coercion.⁷⁸

The Quang Nam Microcosm

The kind of operation that Robert Komer wanted to see become the rule rather than the exception was exemplified, in mid-1967, in Quang Nam Province. The agency officers there submitted a quarterly report that the station sent to all their provincial counterparts as a sample of pacification management at its best. From Saigon’s perspective, the Quang Nam experience taught that U.S. advisers could in fact improve the quality of local Vietnamese leadership. “There is no indication in this report that the RD program must [either] be completely run by the Americans” or “we will sit back and give up on RD and concentrate on C-G or PRU. The authors of this report are seeking Vietnamese leadership and management, a GVN infrastructure, if you will, to replace the VC infrastructure that is being rooted out.”⁷⁹

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The Quang Nam advisers agreed about the importance of indigenous leadership, but claimed no ability to create it. In the report that Saigon circulated to the provinces, they treated as simple good luck the arrival of a new province chief, Lieutenant Colonel Le Tri Tin, who turned out to be amenable to “ideas and methods of operation which the . . . advisers have been trying unsuccessfully through three Province Chiefs to establish.” The Americans, led by Foreign Service officer Albert Francis as senior CORDS adviser, adopted the practice of selling a proposal to Colonel Tin and encouraging him to present it to his subordinates as his own idea. The advisers enjoyed a similarly symbiotic



Quang Nam Province. District boundaries reflected the concentration of population on the coastal plain.

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relationship with the subordinate in charge of RD Cadre matters, Lieutenant Ton That Ban, who upon receipt of orders from Colonel Tin would consult the advisers about the means of implementing them. Their pragmatic exploitation of cooperative Vietnamese managers gained CIA adviser Dick Hamasaki and his assistant Gary Williams, the latter fresh from service in Vinh Binh Province, the confidence of CORDS and the station. This, in turn, resulted in a degree of autonomy that required them only to “count your money and report what you did.”⁸⁰

In the case of Lieutenant Ban, what the station saw as leadership could also be seen as a disposition to bow to American preferences. But it is clear that Colonel Tin was no mere cat's-paw, for he soon demonstrated a willingness to challenge the VNQDD, the nationalist party whose two competing wings dominated noncommunist politics in Quang Nam. VNQDD adherents, who also predominated in the ranks of the cadre programs, took any disciplinary measure as proof of machinations against them by Saigon officials promoting the interests of the rival Dai Viet Party. In these circumstances, Tin displayed real strength of character when he endorsed Hamasaki's recommendation to fire the 150-odd people regarded as irredeemable RDC deadwood.⁸¹

On a later occasion, sometime in 1967, Williams spared Tin a second such confrontation with the local VNQDD when he unilaterally cut from the RDC payroll some 350 names that best evidence indicated had no owners. On the next payday, his shaken paymaster reported that he was being threatened with death by officials who wanted the money paid. Williams accompanied the anxious clerk to a meeting with RDC management at which he pointed out that violence to the paymaster would mean the end of the program. The money would flow as soon as the putative unpaid cadres made a personal appearance. As Williams expected, none did.⁸²

Colonel Tin's rigorously honest administration extended even to the unsolicited return of funds advanced but not needed to meet the cadre payroll. Even more important, he instituted a uniform system of cadre discipline, with shirkers and deserters remanded to the military draft. He launched other improvements, including local training—the subjects ranged from intelligence collection to land reform—as well as streamlining the RD Headquarters element, rationalizing cadre deployment, and forming a survey team to evaluate hamlet and cadre self-defense capabilities. Tin agreed that inexperienced and ill-informed district chiefs presented another obstacle to effective RD management, and he supported an experimental coordinating council in Hieu Nhon District designed to make the chief there an active and effective participant.⁸³

The size of the CIA-supported programs in Quang Nam added to the

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importance of these reforms. By mid-1967, RDC groups numbered twenty-eight, while Census-Grievance employed some 350 people and PRU about 135. Programs as large and varied as these required more American supervision than Hamasaki and Williams could give them, and the station assigned a civilian contract employee and an officer loaned by the Australian contingent in Vietnam. In addition, CIA assistance to U.S. Marine forces in the province had by late 1966 led General Walt to provide additional help in the form of two second lieutenants and a sergeant whose specialty was long-range reconnaissance.⁸⁴

The experiences of this heterogeneous group were doubtless not typical of the adviser's life, for every province had its unique aspects. The case of Quang Nam may nevertheless be taken as emblematic of both the potential of the pacification programs in Central Vietnam and of the obstacles to fulfilling that potential. At the very least, it amply illustrates how eventful an adviser's tour of duty in the provinces could become.

Shortly after Gary Williams took over the CIA team upon Hamasaki's departure in early 1967, he moved the advisers' compound to a former maternity hospital on the edge of the provincial capital at Hoi An. He built defenses, including barbed wire and claymore antipersonnel mines, and manned them with ten guards recruited from a tribal minority called the Nung, which had provided anticommunist manpower from the days of the French. The need for such precautions became clear when the VC assaulted Hoi An one night in August 1967. They quickly penetrated to the provincial military headquarters and overran the local prison, where they freed several hundred convicted VC.⁸⁵

The attack came on a night when Williams was absent in Da Nang. His five men were socializing with a U.S. Navy medical team whose compound lay close to the action. As the sound of weapons fire grew nearer, the "Chicago society doctor" in charge of the team deferred to the combat experience of Williams's Marine sergeant: "You're in charge." The sergeant went to the roof, where he hailed some Vietnamese, apparently civilians, whom he saw in the motor pool next door. They responded with a B-40 rocket grenade that penetrated the sandbags protecting a rooftop machine gun position and melted an ammunition box. The Marine lobbed grenades over the parapet, then returned downstairs, where a VC attacker had made his way into the doctors' tap room. A grenade he hurled inside only wounded the VC, who was then captured, but the explosion destroyed the physicians' prized jukebox. Another VC was killed before the incident ended without American casualties.⁸⁶

Such occurrences were far more the exception than the rule, and life as a

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provincial adviser normally imposed fewer health hazards than did service in the infantry. Williams himself did not come under fire until one of his visits to Duc Duc District, in the mountainous western part of the province. While his pilot struggled to start a recalcitrant aircraft engine, the Viet Cong broke the prevailing tacit cease-fire in the area, aiming mortar shells at the airstrip on the GVN side of the valley from their positions on the other.⁸⁷

In any case, it was the Vietnamese, especially those who declared a political preference, who stood in greatest danger. The fence-sitting so prevalent in many provinces gave way in Quang Nam to a more positive commitment in many of the hamlets served by RDC groups. The province chief did not hesitate to arm hamlet militias, which repaid his confidence by resisting Viet Cong incursions. In one case, after overrunning a small group of lightly armed defenders, the VC executed the hamlet leadership. The surviving elders then asked for the reassignment of an RDC group to reconstitute their defense force. There were other cases in which the villagers “put their ass on the line,” and Williams came to consider this demonstrated commitment the definitive criterion of RD Cadre success.⁸⁸

Despite a communist organization entrenched in the province since the early days of the Viet Minh, most Quang Nam villagers seemed to Williams to prefer the GVN; he thought this explained by the parallel presence of the vigorous—even if fractious—nationalist and anticommunist VNQDD. The U.S. Marine presence kept the North Vietnamese more or less at bay, and in so doing encouraged well-disposed villagers to cast their lot with the GVN. This and an energetic provincial government combined to create a propitious environment for the pacification programs. These functioned as their designers intended them to, with intelligence from Census-Grievance cadres, who were present in some two-thirds of Quang Nam’s hamlets, being exploited to protect RDC groups.⁸⁹

When Williams arrived in Quang Nam in the spring of 1966, he could drive from Da Nang or Hoi An into just three of twelve districts. When he left, in late summer 1967, only Duc Duc and two other mountainous districts in the west were inaccessible by road. In his judgment, the VC infrastructure had by then been severely damaged. The North Vietnamese Army still represented a serious threat, but it was “an invading army,” not an insurgent force, and “we were winning the war.” CORDS management and the station seem to have shared his view of progress in Quang Nam; when a *Time* magazine correspondent, whose name Williams could not recall, wanted to see RDC groups in action, Saigon sent him to Hoi An.⁹⁰

Williams, introduced in his CORDS capacity, wanted to avoid any later

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insinuation of a staged performance, and insisted that the *Time* man pick his own destinations from the map showing RDC group deployments. Landing at the first village chosen, Williams had a stomach-churning moment when no familiar face appeared. But he found the group working according to formula in a nearby hamlet. The beaming group leader proceeded to brief the visitors on his progress, using a map just prepared by the attached C-G contingent. At a second site, a hamlet chief displaying every sign of spontaneous enthusiasm joined the group leader, who hastily assembled his people for the visitors to review. And so it went; Williams thought that the programs could not have looked better even had the reception been rehearsed. He was disappointed, therefore, with the apparent bias in the subsequent *Time* article, which in its unremittingly negative tone looked as if it might have been written before its author left the United States.⁹¹

A War Not Yet Won

Gary Williams, on the scene in Quang Nam, might believe that “we were winning the war” there, but neither he nor headquarters saw that war as already won. The same VNQDD factionalism that afflicted the programs in Quang Ngai Province, down the coast from Quang Nam, also threatened the integrity of the effort in Hoi An. And the rural majority’s preference for the GVN, assuming Williams was right about this, did not prevent the simultaneous presence of a resilient, highly motivated Viet Cong infrastructure. CIA Headquarters concentrated on the VCI in a late summer assessment that noted that the attack on Hoi An, overrunning the prison there, had been accompanied by assaults that destroyed two district headquarters. In this view, overall pacification gains were no better than “marginal” after January 1967.⁹²

The advisory team had ample reason to agree that surface appearances such as a road open to unarmed GVN or U.S. vehicles did not signal the eradication of the VC organization. Williams got an object lesson in this when he attended a “county fair,” a variant of the classic sweep operation in which ARVN psywar elements and provincial GVN agencies, including CIA-supported cadres, joined the U.S. Marines in searching a hamlet for VCI cadres and facilities. The assembled villagers were treated to sick call, and an entertainment troupe helped while away the time as the Marines and an attached PRU element searched the hamlet.⁹³

The hamlet in question lay only a few hundred yards from a Marine battalion encampment, and the friendly villagers provided most of the Marines’ fruit and vegetables, which they brought to camp for sale. But the hamlet had not

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undergone formal pacification, and the possibility remained that it harbored a VCI presence. The PRU element deployed to support the Marines promptly confirmed that presence, finding booby traps, concrete-lined bunkers, camouflaged pits concealing sharpened bamboo stakes to impale the unwary intruder, and caches of documents and weapons. Williams's bodyguard, a Nung nicknamed Tiger, revisited several huts. Splitting a bamboo roof pole, he uncovered a cache of VC documents. He then dug up the hearth, unearthing still more documents.⁹⁴

This evidence of a well-entrenched indigenous communist organization had obvious implications for the state of rural pacification even in the shadow of U.S. Marine artillery. CIA advisers attached more importance to this than did the Marines, who were more interested in tactical intelligence than in imbuing the peasantry with anticommunism. Accordingly, the Marines welcomed the translated highlights of "stacks" of Census-Grievance reports that went daily to the G-2 at Monkey Mountain, outside Da Nang, where they helped the Marines target many of their 1,500 daily patrols and time their bombing attacks on reported enemy concentrations. The Marines generously acknowledged this support; a visitor from the station in Saigon told Williams in mid-1967 of a message from the First Marine Division crediting CIA intelligence with a threefold increase in the ratio of enemy to Marine casualties. Williams kept the Marines apprised of RDC locations, but did not encourage Marine response to VC action against cadre groups unless the cadres were deployed near a Marine encampment and their whereabouts precisely known. In such cases, the very Marine presence usually served to keep the Viet Cong more or less quiescent.⁹⁵

The effectiveness of the cadre programs depended more, of course, on the quality of local leadership than it did on Marine firepower. In Quang Nam, as elsewhere, the relative autonomy of provincial management, even under General Thang's MRD, rewarded local initiative at the price of diluting Saigon's ability to restrain corruption. As a result, despite the demonstrated honesty and goodwill of the province chief, Colonel Tin, the PRU program became an instrument of political ambition. Informants in the unit reported to CIA in the summer of 1967 that the PRU chief, Bui Quang San, was employing his cadres in support of his VNQDD campaign for election to the National Assembly. For the most part, they were engaged in conventional proselyting, but there was some intimidation as well. For some reason, presumably the VNQDD's dominance in the province and not a lack of goodwill, Tin proved helpless to curb these abuses. These became so widespread that Gary Williams suspended CIA support to the PRU.⁹⁶

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U.S. policy regarding the National Assembly elections called for strict neutrality, at least for public consumption, even though CIA was covertly supporting several candidates. The station apparently regarded de facto complicity with San's exploitation of PRU cadres for political campaigning as more nearly neutral than resistance to it. It therefore mandated reinstatement of all 135 cadres, and Williams had to endure the embarrassment of an apology to San, who proceeded to win election to the Assembly. Only with San's departure for Saigon did the station agree that the PRU in Quang Nam had to be pruned. By that time, further reporting had refined somewhat the list of the culpable, and Williams set out to get rid of ninety men.⁹⁷

Williams assembled the entire unit and instructed the men to stack arms and equipment behind the hospital building, after which he marched them around to the front. The truck scheduled to pick up the gear did not arrive, for the driver had smelled trouble and decided not to get involved. Williams dispatched Sonny, his interpreter, to get the vehicle. The tension grew as they waited, and some of the disgruntled troops broke ranks, going back for their weapons. When Sonny drove up the street toward the compound, one of them flung a grenade at the truck. Williams followed the rioters into the street, and while trying to restore order there was shot in the leg from behind. Sonny had already disappeared, and Williams dragged his broken leg to the nearby compound occupied by the station's police adviser. There he found Sonny, sitting with a beer in hand. Meanwhile, the rest of the PRU cadres reclaimed their weapons and equipment.⁹⁸

The incident split the Quang Nam VNQDD. Bui Quang San, his interests already served when he was elected to the Assembly, joined those who valued the CIA connection above the tenure of the affected cadres. With his support, the unit's weapons and equipment eventually found their way back into agency hands. This ended the station's relationship with San, who was later murdered in Saigon. The perpetrator was never found, and the station never learned who was responsible. But Williams was not surprised when paranoid suspicion among Vietnamese familiar with the PRU episode gave rise to the rumor that CIA had taken its revenge.⁹⁹

Trying to Find a Trend

If victory required a flawless performance by the GVN and its allies, defeat was inevitable. But the communists had their own impediments, ranging from their historic reputation for ruthlessness and their hostility to religion to their increasingly draconian demands on the villagers after 1964. In addition, as we

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have seen, the expansion of conventional land warfare created a major problem for the VCI, in that it led the communists to expose some of their cadres to GVN action and to divert others from political and administrative duties into military service. Many villagers, furthermore, apparently blamed the VC presence for the allied artillery and air strikes that killed or dispossessed some and forced many others into GVN-controlled territory as refugees. The expanding pacification campaign, with its capacity to provide services and confer economic benefits, thus enjoyed substantial advantages.¹⁰⁰

It remained, as always, to try to calculate what the communists usefully termed the balance of forces. Who was actually winning, and where? In mid-1967, Deputy Ambassador Porter lamented the persisting absence, even after the adoption of the Hamlet Evaluation System (HES), of a reliable means of measuring and evaluating pacification performance. In September, CORDS declared the HES sufficiently tested for August data to be disseminated in Washington, but a summary of its conclusions showed its vulnerability to being used for facile conclusions. One summary claimed “some degree of GVN control” over 65 percent of the South Vietnamese population, with 17 percent “in areas controlled by the VC.” The station noted that the HES had not been “specifically designed as a measure of population and area control,” but endorsed it nevertheless as the “best available data base on this subject.”¹⁰¹

The CIA officer managing the HES in Saigon defended the system’s methodology, asserting that the weaknesses still drawing complaints from analysts represented failures only of implementation. CORDS district advisers, for example, sometimes evaluated hamlets they had never visited, and province senior advisers often forwarded district reporting without the required comment and evaluation. CORDS advisers, moreover, often failed to solicit the help of knowledgeable agency officers on the provincial advisory team, such as those advising the police and the Census-Grievance program. In any case, this defense of the HES did not extend to certifying it as a basis for informed judgment. Its Saigon manager asserted only that it was “by far and away superior” to any other method—a modest claim given that there was no other method.¹⁰²

For officers in the field, the ambiguous statistics of the HES did not replace intuitive, sometimes only implicit, judgments from anecdotal evidence. Looking at III Corps in midyear, Walter Roberts thought it “still possible today for a good VC squad to infiltrate a hamlet occupied by an RD Team and with the help of several inside agents defeat the team in a few minutes.” As a case in point, he cited the fate of a district CORDS adviser, Robert Franzblau, who had allowed the Bien Hoa deputy province chief for security to taunt him into

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staying overnight together in a particular hamlet. A VC assassination squad hit their lodgings at midnight, killing Franzblau and both the local district chief and his wife; the provincial security chief escaped.¹⁰³

But if local failures were endemic, so were local successes. An RD literacy class in a Binh Duong hamlet began with fifty-eight students, but these dwindled to forty after VC harassing fire, then to zero after a 1 December raid on a classroom in a nearby hamlet. Despite this forceful VC reaction, it took the RD group only four days to persuade thirty students to defy the risk and return to class. The station saw this as evidence of both high RDC morale and villager responsiveness. An RD group in Kien Tuong Province, at first ignored by the villagers, established itself in their estimation with successful defense against VC attacks, and subsequently induced forty-eight families to abandon a VC-controlled area for the safety of a refugee village near a district headquarters. And the station took as a signal of growing response to RD cadres' work a report that two VC in Binh Long province, separated from their unit, "killed themselves with grenades after being refused food and ignored by the people."¹⁰⁴

In the absence of a reliable basis for judgment, American optimism and self-confidence, bolstered by a sometimes emotional commitment to their work and to their Vietnamese clients, encouraged U.S. advisers to see the cup as half full. One officer, working in Quang Ngai Province, displayed an ingratiating if risky combination of honesty and naiveté when he reported on a visit with his interpreter to a hamlet being serviced by two RDC groups he held in low regard. The villagers' responses to his queries about them were "invariably favorable," with many references to economic benefits and better security. He concluded that he had erred in judging the teams' work by "American standards," for with all its shortcomings it represented an improvement on earlier GVN efforts. This it probably did, but the case officer seems to have made no allowance for the habit of deferential Vietnamese villagers to tell authority what they thought it wanted to hear. And the bottom-line question remained open, for he did not explore whether the RDC groups, however cordially received, had actually seized the political initiative from the Viet Cong.¹⁰⁵

When they looked ahead to 1968, agency managers at CORDS Headquarters in Saigon saw essentially the same prospect they or their predecessors had described a year earlier. As allied forces broke up the major communist formations, more resources would become available to exploit new pacification opportunities, and the pace of operations should accelerate. Ralph Hudson, managing the CIA liaison with the MRD in Saigon, forcefully rejected the complaints of some field officers that the creation of RDC groups had now out-

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stripped the capacity to protect them: “We are going to have a breakthrough one of these days soon, security is going to improve, we are going to have better RF and PF protection, and we are going to need every RD Cadre Group that we have on hand.”¹⁰⁶

The Tet offensive arrived at a time when a new instrument for suppressing the communist political and administrative structure was coming to maturity. The new program, which came to be known as Phoenix, assembled local-level reporting on the so-called Viet Cong infrastructure and distributed it to U.S. and GVN military and pacification elements. Phoenix was also an action program, using assets like Provincial Reconnaissance Units and Popular Forces for small-scale operations into contested and enemy-dominated territory. Pacification losses at Tet 1968 drove a forced-draft expansion, and Phoenix eventually, because of excesses both real and imagined, generated more press and public condemnation than any other program ever implemented against the Viet Cong. We will therefore pause, before proceeding to the Tet offensive and its impact on pacification, for a look at the origins of Phoenix, which we will find in the evolution of the GVN intelligence bureaucracy after the demise of the Diem regime, and in CIA efforts to shape and exploit its development.

CHAPTER 12

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A continual CIA effort to find intelligence access to policy levels of the Vietnamese Communist Party and the NLF had always accompanied the station's action programs in rural South Vietnam. But from 1954 to 1964 the agency devoted little attention to the local communist political and administrative structure, later dubbed the Viet Cong infrastructure. Aside from the intelligence by-product of the action programs, the only CIA-sponsored collection on the local party apparatus took the form of the Hamlet Informant program, which subsidized police payments to casual and apparently untrained informants. This effort seems to have been directed more at following guerrilla activity than at penetrating insurgent political or administrative organs. The station had, moreover, no way of monitoring the accuracy or utility of the information the informants produced.

In late 1963, alarmed by the evidence of VC organizational strength that emerged after the demise of the Diem regime, the station joined MACV J-2 and USOM's Public Safety Division in urging a reorganization of GVN intelligence. More amenable to advice on organization than the Diem government had been, the generals agreed to various reforms, among them the conversion of the Sûreté, originally the internal security arm of the French colonial regime, into an organ of the National Police. At the same time, the charter for penetrating the Communist Party went, at least nominally, to the CIA-sponsored Central Intelligence Organization (CIO).¹

The station wanted more centralization of GVN intelligence as a whole, but the generals, probably mindful of the power accruing to the head of a unified system, declined to go along. They did, however, accede to a reorientation of the Sûreté—now called the Police Special Branch (PSB)—from its traditional

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focus, as a French colonial relic, on “maintaining static security.” Henceforth, it would support rural pacification, developing sources “in disputed areas to . . . identify VC cadre and supporters (the infrastructure) in hamlets that are marked . . . for future military occupation as [the] oil spot expands.” The Central Intelligence Organization would enlarge the National Interrogation Center for use by all security and intelligence organs, and would manage all nonmilitary intelligence activity.²

Although neither MACV nor ARVN entertained much enthusiasm for a larger intelligence role for the police, the PSB had won a role in the joint intelligence effort that supported Operation Hop Tac, the 1964 operation intended to consolidate GVN control of the area around Saigon. And it got some results, as the police shared information with the military, and undertook to arrest the first ninety-seven suspects identified under Hop Tac auspices.³

Lingering bureaucratic jealousies were not the only factor limiting the immediate practical benefits of the agency-sponsored organizational reforms. According to the station, the military coup against Ngo Dinh Diem had “drained off a great many of the country’s experts in the intel/security field, and the second coup [which deposed General Duong Van Minh in late January 1964] took much of what talent remained.” This combination of inexperienced, untrained leadership and the customary Vietnamese aversion to joint operations severely inhibited station efforts to improve GVN collection on the communist apparatus in the countryside.⁴

Political infighting, also, aggravated the effects of the GVN’s limited competence and its inhibitions about joint operations. General Nguyen Khanh’s ouster of “Big Minh” as head of the military junta led to a division of spoils between the northern and southern factions of the Dai Viet Party. Adherents of northerner Nguyen Ton Hoan controlled the Interior Ministry and the uniformed police, while Dang Van Sung’s southern faction took the Directorate General of National Police and the Special Branch. Factional ascendancy proved to be a transitory thing, in the political instability of 1964, and whenever the station could find someone to work with, he was likely soon to disappear. Lieutenant Colonel Tran Thanh Ben, for example, the new director general of National Police (DGNP) was junior in rank and lacked an intelligence background, but his energy and cooperative spirit augured well for a productive liaison with CIA and USOM. But he was implicated in the abortive coup against Nguyen Khanh in September 1964, and lost his position to Colonel Nguyen Quang Sanh, whom the station quickly sized up as “poorly suited to his job.” So poorly, it turned out, that Colonel Ben was returned to the post, if only briefly, in November.⁵

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Everyone seems to have been starting essentially from scratch, in the spring of 1964, in the pursuit of intelligence on the communist administrative and political organization, the so-called VC infrastructure. What came to be known as the Phoenix program, with its focus on district-level collection and collation, was still three years in the future. In March, Chief of Station De Silva did not even mention the existing Hamlet Informant program when he proposed a new campaign, Project Hoist, to recruit sources in hamlets targeted for pacification. This early initiative, apparently never put into effect, signaled at least an interest in the problem. MACV, on the other hand, dismissed even the military side of the VCI—that is, its village-level guerrillas—as an intelligence target.⁶

Agency analyst George Allen remembered inquiring about these forces during a visit to Hue in early 1964. The MACV Sector S-2 adviser, although nearing the end of his tour, knew nothing about them. His ARVN counterpart, however, readily responded with numbers for both guerrillas and local forces. Allen saw the adviser's ignorance as a reflection of MACV's lack of interest in any but regular enemy forces. In Allen's view, the military's indifference to the VCI meant that neither the territorials nor the ARVN contributed intelligence of any significance on the composition of the infrastructure, and lacking such information, attrition of the insurgents was incidental and accidental—a by-product of military operations.⁷

Communist gains in the countryside, accompanied by political instability in Saigon, underlined the imperative for better intelligence on both the military and civilian sides of the VC rural apparatus. George Allen's visit to Hue came during the three months he spent in South Vietnam in early 1964 as part of a CIA team dispatched at Defense Secretary McNamara's request to inspect the entire U.S. collection effort against the Viet Cong. One of the team's prescriptions called for an analytic unit in the station to work on the VCI. The team also urged CIA to beef up police intelligence, arguing that PSB, too, should have an analytic capability, as well as professional interrogation facilities. To this end, Allen helped train some analysts before the team left Saigon. In the summer of 1964, DCI John McCone approved a station analytic component, but the staffing problems that afflicted the Vietnamese also affected the agency. The first contingent of some twenty people consisted, in Allen's view, of the "dregs of the DI [Directorate of Intelligence]," and it produced little of value until early 1966.⁸

Meanwhile, Peer De Silva's Project Hoist seems to have been absorbed into a rejuvenated Hamlet Informant program, for which the station proposed training for 2,800 PSB case officers and material support in the provinces. CIA expected to spend just over \$1 million in fiscal year 1965 on collection against

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the communists—\$440,000 to support the police and \$580,000 for higher-level penetration operations with the CIO.⁹

The slow start by its new analytic element, working on the VCI, put the station at a disadvantage in what COS Jorgensen saw as competition with MACV for primacy in the analytic field. Having committed itself in 1964 to participate in the intelligence effort against the VCI, the military treated it as a crash project. In mid-1965, it produced a joint study with ARVN on communist political order of battle in which, as Jorgensen judged it, the “current state of our knowledge is generally reflected.” That the study made liberal use of information from station-supported collection activity was cold comfort to the COS. Failure to develop an equivalent station analytic capability would allow the military to “preempt this field and . . . [try] to establish their own programs within [the] National Police Special Branch and CIO based on their demonstrated ability to produce a superior product.”¹⁰

Jorgensen also demanded that the advisory presence for the cadre programs be supplemented with a full-time intelligence adviser in every province to handle police and CIO liaison and defend CIA equities in the local interrogation center and in provincial intelligence coordination. Not to do so would forfeit to the military what the COS regarded as legitimate agency functions, and he insisted that “we’ve got to establish squatter’s rights everywhere.”¹¹

At the same time, Jorgensen wanted CIA help for USOM’s police advisers, who were trying to set up the National Police Field Force (NPF), the constabulary-like organization designed to attack the VC organization when full-fledged military action was not required. The COS saw the NPF as a potential security screen for the work of his various cadre teams, and the organization’s very existence as a counterweight to the “massive U.S. military expansion now under way” in Vietnam. Accordingly, as CIA pressed USAID Headquarters in Washington to allocate money for this purpose, Jorgensen made a stopgap contribution of some \$200,000 to USOM’s Public Safety Division in the last half of 1964.¹²

The High Road and the Low Road to Intelligence on the VCI

In late 1965, with U.S. ground forces only beginning to restore some equilibrium in the countryside, better information on activity at the communist command level remained fully as important as coverage of the local VCI. Indeed, despite the agency’s contribution to the action side of pacification, the White House still regarded intelligence as CIA’s first priority. The question how best to meet this challenge now turned contentious, as COS Jorgensen proposed

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supporting more than 1,300 agent operations in CIO alone. Colby disagreed. Citing the disappointing history of joint operations with the Vietnamese, he confessed “some surprise” at Jorgensen’s expectation of so many “higher level penetration agents.” He thought the station might do better to try for “ten good high level penetration agents, going through as many as 100 or 200 real cases to get them, rather than dealing with the masses of agents reflected in [the station’s] figures.”¹³

Jorgensen agreed about the need for selectivity in operations aimed directly at the policy level, but he thought it imperative also to sift through a high volume of lower-level informants, at least until the “distant date when we . . . have enough intel to meet customers’ requirements.” He agreed that his approach demanded more money and manpower, the size of the investment reflecting the fact that “we’re just about as late in starting our intel effort against [the] VC as our government was in starting the US military effort. . . . Catching up is never easy or cheap.”¹⁴

The effort to catch up on both tactical and strategic intelligence could take several routes. One of them, mentioned by Jorgensen, involved the screening of hamlet and village informants for access to higher levels of the Viet Cong. Another, which evolved over the course of 1965, was the Provincial Interrogation Center (PIC), operated by the Police Special Branch.

Like most program innovations, this one arose at the local level. The first PIC opened in August 1965 at Nha Trang, in Central Vietnam. Hoping to see it become a joint facility, used by ARVN as well as the police, the station invited the MACV J-2, Major General William McChristian, to participate. His reaction was to mandate the creation of a MACV-supported center, to be called the Sector Interrogation Center, in every province. This replicated on the American side the compartmentation of civilian and military intelligence efforts so prevalent in the GVN. It meant that exploitation of a military source by the police, or the reverse, would be indefinitely delayed, if it took place at all. Despite this anomaly, by the spring of 1966 the station came to see it as a virtue, arguing that it insulated the PIC from ARVN and MACV preoccupation with military order of battle.¹⁵

But order of battle was always easier to come by than intelligence on the VC political and administrative apparatus, and the intelligence product even of the VCI-focused agency programs was weighted on the military side. A dispatch of February 1966 summarizing pacification results for a periodic report to the White House noted that “emphasis continues on forwarding [CIA]/Special Branch information rapidly to the military for action.” In Long An Province, for example, Special Branch reporting had led to air strikes that produced

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three large secondary explosions and destroyed concrete VC bunkers. Station reporting in June from deeper in the Delta credited the Special Branch with early warning of the movement by the VC Tay Do Battalion into Kien Giang Province, where a GVN assault killed 224, by subsequent count, and air strikes accounted for an estimated 200 more. Other PSB information contributed to ARVN plans for an attack on a VC unit called "D206"; this attack netted 58 killed and the capture of 50 men and equipment that included crew-served weapons.¹⁶

Prodded perhaps by the threat of competition from the military—few military interrogation centers had actually appeared by mid-1966—the station pushed the expansion of the PIC network. A CIA officer who visited twenty-two centers in the spring described the task involved in making them effective. Two, in the Delta, were already excellent, he reported, but elsewhere he found the facilities "absolutely appalling," with prisoners being interrogated in the presence of other prisoners, clerks, and even janitorial staff. Prisoners were often housed in a common detention room, which guaranteed collusion by well-disciplined communists and facilitated their intimidation of the weak. And police interrogators often displayed "total ignorance" of the difference between a criminal investigation and an intelligence debriefing. The result was that operations based on information from interrogation looked like "brilliant exceptions rather than the rule."¹⁷

The report said nothing about mistreatment or torture, which at least in some places seems to have further reduced PIC productivity. Repudiated by CIA advisers on practical as well as ethical grounds—physical coercion was seen as a poor way to get reliable information—torture appears to have represented a common Vietnamese interrogation method. Walter Roberts, at the time deputy ROIC in I Corps, remembered having seen batteries and wires scattered around the Quang Ngai PIC in late 1966, and he could imagine only one use for them. But the Vietnamese, aware of the American antipathy to torture, at least in that era, did not normally acknowledge using it, and the record contains no estimate of the extent to which they relied on it.¹⁸

The vagaries of GVN staffing practice did nothing to make the PSB more professional, despite continuing station efforts to imbue its police counterparts with American energy and professional techniques. Vietnamese morale plummeted with the designation of Colonel Nguyen Ngoc Loan, a protégé of Prime Minister Ky, as director general of the National Police, including the PSB. Transferred from an ARVN counterintelligence unit, the Military Security Service (MSS), in mid-1966, Loan began "awarding police plums to ('totally unqualified') MSS friends." The station admitted that most of those being

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replaced were “French trained ‘tired old men,’” but it saw their military successors as no improvement.¹⁹

The Heart of the Phoenix

The acquisition of useful information represented only one side of the pacification intelligence problem. The other side required collating information from all sources and distributing it to every element capable of acting on it. Until late 1966, the lowest level at which these functions took place was the province, or, in military nomenclature, the sector. There probably were exceptions to this arrangement; organized if perhaps temporary programs may have been run by district chiefs (subsector commanders) or by military or pacification task forces. But nowhere, it appears, had the intelligence function been formally devolved down to the district.

As pacification operations expanded after 1965, with a proportionately larger intelligence effort against the VCI, the obstacles to timely processing and reaction at provincial level became increasingly evident. The larger the scale of the pacification campaign, the greater the need for an effective intelligence effort. Dien Ban District, for example, in Quang Nam Province on the coastal highway south of Da Nang, had U.S. Marines as well as GVN forces and the MACV advisory team. Station-supported programs in the district were producing the bulk of the information, both military and political, but other elements, especially military, also were acquiring useful intelligence. Dick Hamasaki, then the station’s senior man in Quang Nam, proposed to unify these disparate efforts in a district-level coordination center. His colleagues, both American and Vietnamese, agreed; the U.S. Marines donated the materials while Hamasaki’s assistant, Gary Williams, supervised the construction.²⁰

Hamasaki coordinated the enterprise with the numerous U.S. and Vietnamese military commands represented in Dien Ban. He arranged for permanent representation from Census-Grievance, Revolutionary Development, PRU, uniformed police, and Police Special Branch. Run by the Dien Ban District’s intelligence officer, the S-2, and with MACV’s district (subsector) S-2 adviser assigned to help him, the first district center went into operation in February 1967.²¹

The immediate improvement, especially but not only in tactical intelligence, led the station’s regional office at Da Nang to promote the center, called the District Intelligence and Operations Coordination Center (DIOCC), as a nationwide program. Walter Roberts, the deputy ROIC for I Corps, had

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watched the preparations for the Dien Ban experiment before he took over as ROIC in III Corps in March 1967. He promptly set about to apply the concept in Bien Hoa Province, the site of ARVN's III Corps Headquarters. Five centers opened by June, and early results led the ARVN G-2 at III Corps to propose setting up fourteen more in III Corps provinces in July. Following the Dien Ban format, Roberts attached to each of the first centers a thirteen-man PRU detachment, a move that allowed them to target individual VCI cadres for capture and interrogation at the Provincial Interrogation Center.²²

Saigon had seized on the Dien Ban expedient primarily as a corrective to the military's emphasis on tactical collection, and intelligence on the VCI constituted the new district center's reason for being. But the DIOCC depended from the outset on military people to staff it. Furthermore, there could be no strict division of labor in a collection effort against an enemy whose own organization blurred the distinction between civilian and military. Shortly after taking up residence in Saigon in the spring of 1967, Robert Komer made it explicit that the DIOCC had tactical as well as anti-VCI responsibilities, and "the tactical situation will usually have priority."²³

To Phoenix by Way of ICEX

The Saigon Station incorporated the DIOCC into a proposed reorganization of the intelligence effort that called for a "new VC infrastructure intelligence collection and exploitation staff (ICEX) system reaching from Saigon down through corps, province, and district levels." The idea seems to have represented, in part, a bureaucratic ploy, for John Hart shared Bill Colby's view that pacification intelligence and Communist Party penetrations required fundamentally different operational approaches. Hart intended, if the idea was accepted, to provide a CIA manager for the effort, but otherwise to staff it with personnel from other agencies, primarily MACV. He would thus keep the station out of the workings of an ICEX system, and retain the ability to deploy his own officers against the communists' policy stratum. Whether or not aware of Hart's purposes, Bob Komer promptly adopted the idea as the answer to an intractable problem. He dispensed entirely with working-level CORDS review when he approved the ICEX concept in May 1967.²⁴

The innovative aspects of the new scheme included the action capability that the Quang Nam team and Walter Roberts had built into the DIOCC when they assigned it a PRU. In Komer's view, the proposed structure, to be established at first on a "U.S.-only' basis," would generate the "integrated, organized attack on the VC infrastructure [which] has not been mounted coun-

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trywide.” Komer described it as “analogous to a ‘rifle shot’ rather than a ‘shot-gun’ approach. Instead of cordon and search operations, it will stress quick reaction operations aimed at individual cadre or at most small groups.”²⁵

In addition to better intelligence coordination and more effective use of information, Komer expected ICEX to address two other perennial problems. One was the disorderly administrative and judicial processing of VC prisoners, with the attendant difficulty of tracking their disposition. The other involved the proprietary attitude of GVN agencies toward the prisoners they captured or defectors they received; reluctance to share such sources for interrogation purposes had always prevented full exploitation.²⁶

Implementing ICEX meant a substantial change in the command arrangement governing military advisers, and Komer needed General Westmoreland’s approval. Although MACV had joined a pilot project, limited to Saigon and Gia Dinh Province, in late 1966, the more comprehensive ICEX proposal provoked considerable resistance. Westmoreland’s chief of staff, Major General Walter Kerwin, and MACV J-2 Major General Philip Davidson objected to ICEX on the ground that it diminished J-2 responsibilities. Komer himself acknowledged that a new structure aimed at the VCI would duplicate, at least to some small extent, the intelligence apparatus already deployed against the communists’ military forces. But the existing system had failed to make any systematic attack on the VCI. Westmoreland doubtless also had in mind Komer’s personal charter from President Johnson to energize the conduct of the “other war” when in June 1967 he overruled his staff and approved the ICEX proposal.²⁷

The COS nominated Evan J. Parker Jr. to serve as Komer’s director of ICEX, where he would run a staff for which Komer wanted 164 people. An army veteran who had served in Burma in World War II, and whose CIA service had involved substantial dealings with the military, Parker had many acquaintances in MACV. His qualifications to run a mixed civilian-military staff were further enhanced by his unassuming personality and by his astute judgment of people and what could be expected of them.²⁸

Parker’s first task was to translate the station-drafted proposal into military language and format. The resulting MACV directive was published on 9 July 1967. Komer and Parker then set out to construct the ICEX machinery throughout the MACV hierarchy. But the main purpose of the exercise was gradually to integrate and improve the functioning of Vietnamese intelligence, and Komer began to solicit GVN participation. In August, he and COS Hart briefed Minister of Security Linh Quang Vien. Vien’s initial reaction seemed favorable, but the Americans quickly ran into opposition from his top

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police official: DGNP Nguyen Ngoc Loan objected to a coordinating mechanism, arguing that one agency—presumably the police—should run the effort, with cooperation from all the others. Parker agreed that Loan's Police Special Branch would play a central role, but pushed the Komer-Hart position that only a new coordinating body could deal with competing requirements for collection on the communist military and on the VC political and administrative structure.²⁹

Phoenix and Phung Hoang

Loan's capacity to obstruct the ICEX approach faded when General Thieu defeated Loan's patron, Nguyen Cao Ky, in the presidential elections of September 1967. In December, the figurehead prime minister, Nguyen Van Loc, decreed the integration of all GVN activities against the VCI into a program he dubbed Phung Hoang, after a mythical bird endowed with extraordinary powers. Komer promptly renamed the American advisory effort, ICEX, after the nearest Western equivalent, the phoenix.³⁰

The organization created to house the Vietnamese effort consisted of a National Intelligence Coordination Center (NICC), with a branch in each province. Probably because the American-designed ICEX mechanism assigned the lead role to the police, the military-run GVN structure acquired a separate identity. The police were not integrated into it until March 1968, at which point the American ICEX-led effort was absorbed into the NICC.³¹

When the GVN meant business, its edicts came from the presidential palace. Accordingly, the ministerial provenance of the NICC decree in December seems to have signaled a somewhat pro forma response to American lobbying for unified management of the anti-VCI campaign. But even if it reflected a genuine Vietnamese commitment, the decree needed voluminous implementing directives if it was actually to change GVN practice. Komer and his staff found themselves once more in a lobbying mode, urging GVN officials from President Thieu down into the ranks to put Phung Hoang into practice.³²

Staffing of the advisory Phoenix program, meanwhile, was completed, at least in Saigon. The CIA contribution began with COS and deputy COS membership on Komer's Phoenix Committee. Its chief, Evan Parker, and its executive officer and chief of operations, plus an analyst and two secretaries, all came from the station. For the most part, station participation in Phoenix staffing entailed a second hat for an agency officer already working against the VCI. As Phoenix chief of operations, for example, John Hart assigned to CORDS the chief of his Intelligence Operations Division (IOD), which con-

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ducted joint operations with the Police Special Branch. IOD was now nominally attached to CORDS as Revolutionary Development Cadre/Plans Division, in the same way that the station's Cadre Operations Division had joined CORDS as RDC/Operations.³³

John Hart did not entirely succeed in keeping his provincial staff out of Phoenix. Although he avoided losing any officers to full-time duty with it, he agreed to deputize an officer at each corps and sector headquarters to serve as Phoenix coordinator. These officers were to synchronize, on a part-time basis, the anti-VCI efforts of all U.S. collection elements, including the American representation at the DIOCC, and to evaluate performance. The new program demanded a similar increase in the MACV investment, and General Westmoreland provided 103 officers, with majors and captains at region and province level and 55 lieutenants at the DIOCCs.³⁴

Whereas Evan Parker and a few others devoted their efforts entirely to putting Phoenix on its feet, most of the participating station officers found themselves performing a balancing act, trying to render to Komer the things that were Komer's and to Hart the things that were Hart's. Bill Colby seemed to be issuing self-contradictory instructions when he told John Hart to maintain the "special status" of the station's intelligence work against the communists even while trying to approach the VCI as "one intelligence target rather than as [the subject of] separate bureaucratic attacks." But Lew Lapham, charged with overseeing this divided agenda, saw no problem with implementation: the CIA provincial officer would "report one way to his CORDS chief [in province] and another way to his CIA chief [the ROIC]."³⁵

If Lapham was right about bureaucratic practice at the provincial level, the fact remained that he had a balancing act of his own to perform. Bill Colby and John Hart both treated pacification intelligence as a distraction from the agency's responsibility for high-level penetrations of the Communist Party and the NLF. But penetrations depended on leads from GVN agencies and on agency expertise to recognize and take advantage of them. Both of these were in short supply in late 1967.

Acting as COS in Hart's absence, Lapham echoed Gordon Jorgensen's position when he took issue with Colby's position on station staffing. Colby wanted him to negotiate for more military personnel for Phoenix duty, and thus to liberate participating agency case officers for work in penetration operations. Lapham thought this approach ignored the shortage of promising leads. He pointed out that those from PSB penetration efforts had been "almost entirely fabrications or extremely low level," with the result that "operations of real merit can be counted on the fingers of one hand." He added that fully trained

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CIA case officers were in any case now a rarity in the provinces, where the station already depended heavily on military detailees and contract employees to work both the cadre and the collection programs.³⁶

The fact, as Lapham saw it, was that CIA “collection responsibilities at the province level are not going to be fulfilled through penetration ops.” The best information was coming from captured documents, interrogations of prisoners and defectors, volunteer informants, C-G, and “to a limited extent” from PSB informants. These were the same sources being exploited for tactical pacification intelligence, and Lapham therefore did not see pacification intelligence and penetration operations as competing for agency attention at the province level.³⁷

In any case, Lapham disagreed with the scale of priorities implied in the call for redirection of station resources devoted to pacification intelligence. DGNP Loan had finally accepted the CORDS and station view that the police had no more important target than the “VC secret government,” and he would find a sudden reduction in CIA participation in Phoenix simply incomprehensible. So would Komer, and Lapham saw not the slightest chance of his accepting it. “Nor in our opinion should he,” Lapham wrote, for the collection mission in the provinces “is the ICEX [i.e., Phoenix] mission. It is the only mission in which we can realistically expect to succeed.”³⁸

Colby’s reply, insisting on more attention to policy-level penetration operations, assumed what Lapham had just rejected as counterfactual. He still insisted that an infusion of more military personnel into the cadre programs would liberate substantial numbers of trained CIA intelligence officers for high-level collection operations. The debate went unresolved, for the moment, as information began trickling in that suggested a major communist assault in early 1968.³⁹

Trying to Get the Phoenix Airborne

Even before its formal adoption by the GVN, the impulse behind ICEX/Phoenix began to influence operations in the field, and not only in Quang Nam. The record for late 1967 documents the increasing frequency of intelligence sharing for exploitation against the VCI. In one province, a PRU commander won direct access to prisoners at the police-run Provincial Interrogation Center. Elsewhere, Census-Grievance disseminated intelligence directly to the PRU. There were other such instances, including a raid conducted by a combined force of PRU and police.⁴⁰

Despite such encouraging signs, the station remained preoccupied with the obstacles to getting the Phoenix concept universally accepted and applied.

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Difficulties were to be expected, of course, and their existence did not necessarily bode ill for the long-range prospects of the campaign against the VCI. But problems did in fact abound, some of them structural, others the product of temporary circumstance. Correspondence from agency officers working at regional and provincial level describes some of those that loomed largest in the summer of 1967.

In Bien Hoa, Walter Roberts anticipated—he may well have provoked—Lew Lapham’s complaint about the shortage of intelligence expertise in the provinces. Because of the heavy reliance on contractors and military detailees, the station’s province officer was “in most instances not a trained or experienced agent handler,” and in any case found most of his time absorbed by the cadre programs. He had first of all to fulfill these programs’ administrative requirements, reporting separately to CORDS and the station. Then, he had to satisfy “his conscience that available tactical information is getting to the U.S. troops to help them keep their casualties down.” While engaged in these chores, he had to avoid extinction by a “grenade throwing drunken [ARVN] Ranger or while travelling from one district to another over roads with long records of ambushes.” Only then could he even begin to think about developing clandestine sources.⁴¹

In III Corps, the police-run Provincial Interrogation Centers won access to knowledgeable prisoners only with CIA intervention. Without it, ARVN would sequester all the best cases. This happened even with prisoners taken by a PRU or other provincial unit; having asserted its authority to get custody of the prisoner, ARVN would then refuse to share its interrogation report with the police. The ROIC in I Corps thought the police themselves saw the PICs as merely “‘American’ institutions,” irrelevant to PSB “capabilities. Thus they languish. In the face of this torpor we nevertheless plan to push relentlessly ahead with planning for a . . . Regional PSB training facility.” The ROIC continued: “The only glimmer of results we can see down this tunnel of lassitude lies in our doing it ourself [*sic*] by hiring our own staffs for the PICs and temporarily putting the rule book aside. There are times when we have to step in actively, if temporarily, to get things moving again.”⁴²

The Da Nang ROIC found particularly frustrating the gulf between PSB promise and performance: “The police are our most important potential asset while their actual performance is the most disappointing.” His colleague in Bien Hoa deplored a similar lack of production: with twenty-three officers in the provinces, Roberts expected to have at least that many agent operations. But there were only a dozen, with one really good one, “if we are lucky.” Much of what came out of PSB, and CIO as well, turned out to be fabricated,

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whether only by duplicitous sources or with at least occasional complicity by their officers is not clear. CIA action to correct these failures was inhibited by the language barrier and by weak PSB leadership from Saigon.⁴³

Walter Roberts saw another cause of police ineffectiveness, one that made the service a de facto adversary, as well as an ally, in the pacification process. "A province with corruption at the top is not a place where anybody is going to be allowed to develop any kind of an investigative or intelligence organization. It quite obviously might uncover the moneymaking schemes of the people in power." Corruption could also undermine pacification gains already achieved. Without saying how many III Corps provinces he had in mind, Roberts complained that the police in some of them were not merely failing to consolidate the gains of the RDC groups; they were also "corrupting the people who have been brought under the GVN wing by the RD effort."⁴⁴

Roberts did not conclude that the situation was irretrievable. But if "the outlook from here is not bad . . . it is quite a bit more long range than most are willing to admit." And even this qualified optimism assumed that the Vietnamese government to be elected in September 1967 would be "given a very frank understanding of where the money comes from and how little their popular mandate means if that money is cut off." Meanwhile, the "short-range outlook is not so bright and no one should think that twisting the tail of the province officers is going to change it."⁴⁵

The agency had always made a point of pride its ability to do a lot with a little. People in the field sometimes saw this as taken to a counterproductive extreme, as in one reaction to still another headquarters requirement on the province officers. The officer in charge of station liaison with the Police Special Branch delivered to John Hart a howl of outrage that the COS forwarded to headquarters for Bill Colby's "information and, I hope, amusement."⁴⁶

The first complaint resembled that of Walter Roberts: "Each element of our vast organization—from here to Washington and often in grand isolation from the other—is taking its bite" out of each province officer. Bill Colby wanted "Quality Intelligence through Quality Operations," and the military wanted comprehensive tactical coverage. Various station and headquarters components each levied their own requirements: intelligence coverage of the South Vietnamese election campaign, screening leads to VC penetration operations, and identifying Vietnamese candidates for roles in "nation building." The province officer was to make these substantive contributions while

managing his house, his staff, his guards, his commo, his spot reports, his [reporting] highlights, his files, his vehicles, his generator, his Prov-

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ince Senior Adviser, the Sector S-2 Adviser, the Province Chief, the Police Chief, the PSB Chief, the ROIC, and his ulcer or sick kidney. He also writes home occasionally and takes time to wonder why his \$5.00 a day [presumably some kind of subsistence supplement] was taken from him, why he'll be allowed only two trips a year to see his family in nearby Hong Kong or Manila, and whether the VC will find his house with one of those recoilless rifles before his tour is up.⁴⁷

There was more in this vein, directed mainly at Colby's insistence on better intelligence. The aggrieved liaison officer had the impression that Colby was "rather proud of the results achieved by his reports team that came out here last summer. They went to every region and just about every province and they ground out a lot of reports. [Colby's] conclusion from this exercise was that the stuff is there if only the [province officer] will get it out. What it suggests to me is that it demonstrated a requirement for a trained reports officer for every province. After all, the team represented additional and expert talent during its stay." Bill Colby did not record his reaction to this jeremiad, but the CIA province adviser never did acquire a professional reports officer.⁴⁸

Phung Hoang and Census-Grievance

Two of the station's cadre programs, Census-Grievance and Provincial Reconnaissance, were to be integrated into the Phoenix/Phung Hoang program, C-G as an intelligence producer and the PRUs as a reaction force at the disposition of the district chief. In both cases, the vertical structure of the program threatened the flexible arrangements so important to its success. Accordingly, preserving that flexibility became a chronic concern to CIA.

The C-G program presented a unique problem. Although intelligence production constituted one of its two main purposes, this had to be treated in everyday practice as a by-product of the social service aspect. The C-G cadre had to appear interested primarily in soliciting peasant aspirations and in providing a confidential channel for complaints against the GVN. A simple concept, its application proved considerably more difficult after the station expanded the Kien Hoa experiment into a nationwide program. The problem lay in maintaining the desired emphasis on service as both an end in itself, generating villager identification with the GVN, and as a device for eliciting information on the Viet Cong.⁴⁹

Intelligence results were always easier to measure than peasant loyalties. The collection task, moreover, was more readily understood by the flood of

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new case officers, many of them untrained in psychological warfare or political action, that accompanied rapid expansion of the cadre programs after 1965. The result, according to management in Saigon, was that there were in the summer of 1967 “still some provinces where both American and Vietnamese officers are unsuccessfully trying to collect information on the VC through the C-G program before winning the confidence of the people.”⁵⁰

When John Hart and Bill Colby reviewed CIA's rural programs in mid-1967, the COS said that during the past year he had repeatedly emphasized to his case officers the public relations aspect of C-G. Hart acknowledged that this emphasis had confused some of his people in the provinces, but he concluded that it had “not damaged, in fact may have contributed to, provincial intelligence disseminations which have doubled since September 1966.” Discussing the impending C-G integration into Phung Hoang, Hart expected one benefit to be protection for the program from “possible charges from elected [presumably GVN] officials that this is an uncontrolled American espionage program interfering in internal affairs.” But there were possible disadvantages; one was that subordination to the central government might weaken the local initiative that accounted for the program's successes.⁵¹

On 16 August 1967, Prime Minister Ky signed the Census-Grievance nationalization decree. In effect, this gave official status to what the station had already achieved in practice. The decree put the C-G program in the Ministry of Revolutionary Development, where grievances and requests for services generated by C-G were to help set the pace and agenda of RDC operations. The decree also contained a provision, urged by the station, that reaffirmed the authority of the province chief over C-G activity and limited ministerial authority to cases unresolvable at province level. The CIA objective in all this was to secure pro forma GVN sponsorship while avoiding interference by the government's Saigon bureaucracy. The station assured headquarters that it fully intended to “retain practical control over . . . [the] program to prevent its emasculation” by the GVN.⁵²

The station had little cause to worry about GVN interference with C-G; when General Thang took it and the rest of the RD Cadre program with him to the Joint General Staff in October 1967, he lacked even a staff section to supervise it. At that point, the program employed 5,400 people, working in forty-one provinces. The station estimated that C-G cadres in 3,400 hamlets were representing the GVN to some 5 million people, about a third of the population.⁵³

If CIA wanted minimal intrusion by the Saigon government, it nevertheless saw regular inspections of C-G operations as indispensable to program integ-

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rity. Although Hart had assured Colby that soliciting peasant opinion preceded intelligence elicitation, there were still “provinces where both aspirations and grievances are neglected completely, usually because the province chief has little faith in their efficacy.” Agnosticism was not the only impediment. The station noted that several province chiefs had been “denounced” for corruption and that the An Giang Province chief abolished his programs and confiscated the files of his own C-G office in a move that suggested a cover-up of malfeasance. Such cases underlined the adversarial aspect of the C-G program with respect not only to the avowed enemy, the Viet Cong, but to local GVN satraps as well. These cases also explain the station’s interest in direct participation in the inspections carried out by the CIA-sponsored C-G National Study Center.⁵⁴

Inspections served also to reveal and presumably to deter corruption in the program itself. The station reported that in 1967 alone, the station-trained administrators of nineteen provincial programs had been fired for corruption or incompetence, usually after the visit of an inspection team from the National Study Center. But despite these failings, intelligence from C-G cadres was enjoying praise from the U.S. Marines in I Corps, and in Go Cong and Phong Dinh provinces C-G was said to constitute the best source of information on the VC. In Phu Yen, where the province chief fully supported the program, C-G informants gave advance warning that led to the defeat of a North Vietnamese Army attack on the provincial capital. The station gave an example of the kind of transaction responsible for C-G successes: a cadre in Vinh Long Province did no more than help a fisherman do some paperwork necessary to get an engine for his boat. The fisherman later volunteered information that allowed U.S. Navy elements to ambush a VC force as it crossed the Bassac River at night.⁵⁵

Phung Hoang and PRU

National Security Action Memorandum 34, issued in May 1967, incorporated American support of the Provincial Reconnaissance Units into the CORDS structure, but it specified that control was to remain with the special assistant to the ambassador, that is, with the chief of station. This ended a months-long debate about the locus of U.S. sponsorship during which headquarters proposed transferring the effort to the military in a reprise of Operation Switchback. The station cited the failure of the CIDG program in its argument that the PRU concept would decay if MACV were put in charge. Ambassadors Lodge and Porter, both still in Saigon in early 1967, supported Hart’s position. The COS told headquarters that their evaluation of PRU results was “highly

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appreciative and laudatory,” and that they were encouraging operations into VC-controlled as well as in contested territory. Porter wanted continued station management of the program, which the station now saw as “an extension of the Police Special Branch,” undertaking missions the police lacked the training to accomplish in areas they could not penetrate.⁵⁶

Whatever the differences over management, there was no argument about the need for more provincial staffing to ensure compliance with PRU’s intelligence mission. Although capture of VC cadres had always been a PRU priority, this had accompanied, at least in the program’s early days, a punitive mission aimed at reciprocating communist terror. Attention to capture operations was also sometimes slighted in favor of PRU deployment along conventional military lines. In the desperate circumstances of 1964 and 1965, with the momentum on the communist side, some province chiefs had found in their PRU units, and even in their RDC groups, their only reliable reaction forces. Others, indulging a bunker mentality, had used their PRUs for static security around the province headquarters. The station had responded to VC inroads by allowing massive increases in the PRU complement, especially in Central Vietnam, and Walter Roberts recalled that, in late 1966, PRU and RDC teams in VC-dominated Quang Ngai Province together made up an autonomous army of some 5,000 men.⁵⁷

In late March 1967, with OCO about to give way to CORDS, headquarters acceded to continued CIA management of PRU “with the understanding that the program will continue to emphasize the collection of intelligence,” primarily against the VCI. Bill Colby said he accepted that this meant “direct action to capture or arrest” members of the infrastructure, and that, “on occasion, casualties will result from efforts by the Viet Cong to escape arrest or capture.” There being no reserve of qualified CIA paramilitary officers, Colby encouraged the use of more U.S. military as provincial advisers, and asked for steps to “legalize the PRU as part of the Vietnamese police structure.”⁵⁸

In an early May flurry of correspondence on the PRU mission, headquarters objected to what it saw as a drift back to the paramilitary orientation the station claimed already to have corrected. Colby insisted on the countersubversive mission as a condition of continued agency sponsorship, and rejected the station’s recommendation that local cover for PRU advisers be situated in MACV. Although still prepared to use military personnel on detail to the station, he thought that the prevailing wide identification of PRU with the agency would make its nominal transfer to MACV look ridiculously artificial.⁵⁹

This objection lost most of its force with the creation of CORDS, and ostensible PRU sponsorship moved from the station to Robert Komer’s Phoe-

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nix organization in early 1968. Months earlier, the station had appealed to MACV for military personnel to assist in the provinces. Always uncomfortable with unconventional forces, General Westmoreland nevertheless acceded on 1 July 1967, approving an initial complement of four officers and forty non-commissioned officers to serve as PRU advisers. Westmoreland also approved deploying a dozen SEALs, the U.S. Navy's version of the army's Special Forces, to the PRU program. This gave formal status to an arrangement at Vung Tau that had caused some difficulty when the SEALs, having developed a proprietary attitude toward the program, resisted the late-1966 shift of emphasis to intelligence collection.⁶⁰

At this point, the program had no national-level GVN sponsorship, and it was not until 24 July 1967 that JGS chairman General Cao Van Vien declared PRU a "joint activity of the Vietnamese [Joint] General Staff and the MACV Command." In an unusual *de facto* cession of sovereignty, Vien explicitly accorded the American provincial adviser the "initial responsibility for drawing up plans, determining needs, and for liaison with all other intell organs."⁶¹

Later in the year, reflecting the drive to increase small-scale operations against individual VCI targets, the station and the GVN promulgated a new format for PRU team organization. Henceforth, each unit would have three six-man squads, and provincial strength would vary from one to twenty of these eighteen-man teams.⁶²

The record does not explain why the GVN put PRU under ARVN's wing, thus effectively denying the CIA its preference to integrate the program into the National Police. This had material consequences, one of them the continued reluctance of GVN officials at both national and provincial levels to accord legal status to arrests made by PRUs. One argument for a police rather than a military affiliation rested on the perceived need to confer on PRU cadres the power of arrest, but the GVN's action put this on indefinite hold. Looking at the longer term, the station wanted a police connection for the PRU for a second reason. This concerned the need to maintain the ability to fight the VC even if a negotiated settlement required a standdown on military operations, for a cease-fire would certainly be followed by accelerated VC subversion.⁶³

With PRU legal status still indeterminate, some thought the program should be judged by its results. Writing from Bien Hoa, III Corps ROIC Walter Roberts reported discovery by a PRU element of several hundred pounds of demolitions near Tan Son Nhut Air Base in June 1967. The PRU also seized half a dozen members of a VC demolitions company, including the commander. In Roberts's view, forestalling a potentially devastating raid on the air base—also Saigon's civilian airport—compensated "many times over for the cost of main-

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taining such a unit and putting up with all the claims about no legal base and American mercenaries.”⁶⁴

Allegations of PRU atrocities, at least occasionally documented as fact, also impeded the program’s conversion to police status. In January 1967, an “over zealous” PRU element in Long An Province decapitated several VC after killing them in a pitched battle. A CIA memorandum on this incident said that “we were appalled to learn” of the atrocity; “such breaches of discipline are quickly stopped and those responsible reprimanded.” A reprimand might well have sufficed to discourage repetition—provincial advisers could at will reduce material support to PRU operations—and no record has been found of other such incidents in Long An. But the aura persisted, nourished in part by the agency’s refusal to acknowledge the widely known fact of CIA sponsorship.⁶⁵

The PRU in Practice

In Long An Province, the PRU campaign against the VCI turned into a duel with the VC’s Special Action Unit, a province-level element responsible for assassinations in and attacks on the capital at Tan An. A former chief of the unit, who had defected from the VC in 1966, acquired information in early 1968 on the present chief’s whereabouts and itinerary. He passed it on to the PRU, which mounted an ambush in which the VC unit leader and his bodyguard were killed. At this point, the Special Action Unit had lost its seventh chief at PRU hands.⁶⁶

The new chief of the unit became the next PRU target. Like many, probably all, successful PRUs, the Long An organization had developed its own sources of information, such as defectors, informants, and personal contacts in contested areas. From somewhere in this network came information on VC planning for an attack on Tan An. Used here in conjunction with Regional Force defenders, the PRU set up an ambush on the withdrawal route specified in the intelligence. The VC used it as planned, and the PRU took them under fire. Pursuing the enemy until itself coming under heavy fire, the PRU succeeded in killing the new Special Action Unit chief, bringing to eight the number of fatalities in that position. A village guerrilla platoon leader also died in the fight. Such encounters, increasingly resembling a blood feud, necessarily produced PRU casualties as well; in this one the unit lost its third leader in three months.⁶⁷

An earlier action, elsewhere in the Delta, involved a special PRU element composed of ex-VC and reflected an even more intensely personal motivation. A VC “avenger unit” had killed the mother of one defector after he rallied to

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the GVN, and he had sworn revenge on the perpetrators, whose identities he apparently knew. Leading his five men into VC territory, he found the unit's hideout, and in the ensuing attack all of the eight VC there were killed. Found in the hideout was a part from an outboard motor of the type used by a party, including a U.S. Special Forces lieutenant, that had been ambushed and wiped out patrolling a nearby canal a week earlier. The station inferred that the operation had fortuitously avenged that ambush.⁶⁸

As these incidents illustrate, there was indeed an asymmetry between PRU tasking, even when directed at capture for interrogation, and the law enforcement charter of the police. PRUs operated as combatants fighting an enemy who asked no more quarter than he gave, while the police were constrained by the real if limited requirements of due process.

Another problem, in the context of turning the PRU into an arm of the police, was the uneven quality of the provincial PRUs. Like any other program, PRU would fail when its leadership failed it. In Phu Yen Province, where in 1967 the well-led RD Cadre program was attracting the voluntary relocation of villagers away from VC control, the PRU came close to collapse. With a total strength of less than 200, the PRU had suffered 50 casualties during 1966. Worse, 41 had deserted, and an estimated 15 of these had defected to the VC. Although the unit had killed some 70 VC and captured 78, its unexplained losses, especially the desertions and defections, suggested fatally defective provincial management.⁶⁹

Nevertheless, PRUs seem always to have enjoyed better morale than did the police, and neither CIA nor the GVN ever considered doing without the program's combat potential. And in the course of time, PRU practice became increasingly compatible with police procedure. Vengeful ex-VC in PRU ranks might sometimes resist the emphasis on capture, but the record for 1967 documents numerous VC seized by PRUs, with the prisoners delivered to Provincial Interrogation Centers for intelligence exploitation. The program also increasingly exploited the personal connections of former VC to induce further defections.⁷⁰

On occasion, only the station adviser seemed concerned to get the most out of his PRU. In July 1967 in Quang Tri Province, the CIA man dispatched fifty men into VC country to destroy a 150-ton rice cache. Burning that much rice took enough time to attract VC harassment, but neither ARVN nor sector forces would help. It also gave time for word to reach the local Popular Forces, members of which complained that they owned the huts being torched to destroy the rice stored inside. The district chief threatened the PRU with sanctions, and the adviser withdrew the unit. The local GVN left the remaining rice to the VC.⁷¹

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The formal PRU mission, devoted to direct action against the VCI, made no explicit provision for support to U.S. and other allied forces in Vietnam. But there could be no argument about deploying the PRU in this capacity wherever it could give allied forces an advantage in their war of attrition with the VC and the North Vietnamese Army. Sometimes, this support compensated to some degree for ARVN nonfeasance. On 18 June, a PRU element operating in communist-dominated Mo Duc District in Quang Ngai located a VC battalion sheltered in a tunnel. The information went the next day to an ARVN battalion running a so-called search and destroy mission in the area of the VC bivouac. But the ARVN commander, citing the scheduled end of his mission and the reported size of the communist force, deferred to the Americans (he had already suffered thirty casualties without inflicting any confirmed VC kills). On the 21st, a PRU element led the Third Brigade of the U.S. Twenty-fifth Division to the site. The ensuing attack killed sixty-five communist troops, with twelve captured, along with forty-eight weapons and three radios. There were no U.S. or PRU casualties.⁷²

Even more VC casualties resulted from an operation, also in Mo Duc but two weeks earlier, when a ten-man PRU element guided a U.S. infantry company into enemy territory. The PRU located a VC company bivouacked in a hamlet and took it under fire. An American blocking force deployed by helicopter sealed the VC escape route, and the communists lost ninety dead. By no means all PRU action with U.S. forces produced such dramatic results; some American units liked to use PRUs for such chores as reconnaissance and prisoner interrogation. Whatever the specific agenda, PRU cooperation with U.S. forces became commonplace, not only with the U.S. Marines in I Corps but with army units like the 101st Airborne Division, which in October had fifty-two PRU cadres attached to it.⁷³

General Westmoreland's approval in July 1967 of uniformed MACV advisers for the PRU program included authority for them to participate in operations. A station report for September 1967 cites two such actions, both aimed at capturing VC cadres. In one, an advisory party of one officer and two NCOs joined twenty-two PRU cadres in an unsuccessful effort to seize a VC district chief in Binh Tuy Province. In Kien Giang, the MACV sector adviser joined the PRU man on another capture operation, which netted three VC prisoners of unspecified rank.⁷⁴

As these episodes suggest, the PRU charter for operations against the civilian and guerrilla infrastructure was most likely to be observed when U.S. forces did not compete for PRU services. In operations against the VC infrastructure, the most common objective remained capture for interrogation, with lethal

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force used if the targeted individual resisted or other armed VC were encountered. A tally of PRU results for the period from May through September 1967 showed 1,500 VC killed and 960 captured. Of the 600 captured from June to August, 30 were district- or province-level cadres. PRU losses included only 99 dead, most of them in two badly planned conventional ARVN operations, and 1 captured.⁷⁵

Capturing or killing VC cadres did not limit the means of what Phoenix advisers called neutralization. Other ways to damage the VCI included discrediting it in the eyes of the villagers and making VC cadres look to their superiors as if they had betrayed their trust. An elaborate operation in Vinh Long Province provides an example. Relying, as such gambits always did, on intimate knowledge of the locality and its people, this one aimed at making a village finance chief appear to be extorting funds for his own use. The Vinh Long PRU had two cadres who had served as VC tax collectors in the area that included the target village. They had earlier captured tax receipts bearing the target's signature, and these were used to forge VC tax assessment forms.⁷⁶



Provincial Reconnaissance Unit leader presenting a plaque to departing Chief of Station Lewis Lapham, Vung Tau, November 1968. (Courtesy of Lewis Lapham.)

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Rhadé PRU ceremony at Ban Me Thuot, 1968. Dean Almy second from right. (Courtesy of Dean Almy.)

The four-man team of ostensible tax collectors proceeded to Phuoc Hau village, where they issued an assessment to each of thirty families, specifying an amount and the deadline for payment to the village finance chief. A week later, the wife of a PRU man visited Phuoc Hau and saw the VC cadre being led away by four armed men. A few days after that, villagers said he had been arrested because of “money problems” and taken to the headquarters of the Vinh Long VC provincial committee. His ultimate fate was not known, and the station could only infer that the VC reputation for financial integrity had suffered.⁷⁷

Tangible evidence of PRU ability to affect the balance of political forces in a contested village emerged after a VC attempt to plant a bomb at the PRU camp in Bac Lieu, in the Mekong Delta. A covert VC cadre visited a PRU man, an old friend, under the pretext of borrowing money. But the bag he was carrying looked suspicious, and during the interrogation that followed a search and the discovery of a bomb, the VC explained his mission as one of retaliating for PRU destruction of the VCI in three hamlets. He claimed that VC cadres had refused to reenter them “in fear of future PRU kidnappings.”⁷⁸

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The station reported in December 1967 that CORDS chief Robert Komer wanted the PRU program doubled in size. William Redel, the CIA officer running it, foresaw gradual expansion to 6,000 men by mid-1969. Headquarters wanted formal notification of Komer's support for PRU expansion, which the station forwarded in mid-January 1968. Komer asserted that PRU was now "fully supported by both MACV and JGS," and in language probably furnished by the station he described PRU as "the one Vietnamese force that operates almost entirely at night. Reports are increasing that the VC . . . in some areas are even fearful of sleeping in the hamlets at night . . . , which is a welcome turn of events."⁷⁹

With the integration of PRU into the national pacification machinery, the Phung Hoang campaign against the VCI took on the shape it would retain for the rest of the American engagement in it. The GVN commitment to this U.S.-sponsored campaign was by no means unconditional, at this point, but the Saigon government had no alternative strategy, and implementation proceeded. At the beginning of 1968, 103 districts, roughly two-thirds of the total, each had a District Intelligence and Operations Coordinating Center. An effective DIOCC ran the intelligence effort at the working level, collating intelligence from hamlet informants and C-G cadres, and from defectors, prisoners, and captured documents. A competent and energetic center would then exploit the intelligence product with activity ranging from military operations to efforts to induce VC defectors.⁸⁰

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The effectiveness of the organizational reforms and accelerated material investment introduced by CORDS depended as much on broader strategic and political questions as it did on the programs themselves. President Nguyen Van Thieu, elected in September 1967, was prepared to acknowledge that, as a U.S. Army historian put it, pacification prospects depended not only on “battlefield successes, but on . . . reform and reorganization efforts within the South Vietnamese armed forces and government.” In January 1968, Thieu told a senior CORDS official, Major General George Forsythe, that he wanted to get the ARVN corps and division commands out of territorial security, and cut the deadwood out of the officer corps. But the Americans had to understand that the “army could not be removed from politics overnight.” It was not only his “major political supporter,” but “the only cohesive force holding the country together.”¹

As Thieu had stipulated, to acknowledge a need was one thing, to act on it another. Komer told Ambassador Bunker in early January that the GVN might simply be unable to meet the communist challenge, for Thieu’s ministries did not function and the president’s commitment to reforms looked “hollow.” General Thang expressed himself more forcefully, complaining to his American contacts that the ARVN corps commanders were sabotaging pacification. He saw the GVN as showing a “frightening reluctance” to seize opportunities, preferring to let the United States bear the burden of the war. In his view, the GVN performance was marked by “corruption in the provinces and districts, inefficiency at corps, and incompetence in Saigon.” Thang was not merely let-

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ting off steam, for he soon left the Joint General Staff, where he had run the territorial forces and pacification programs, to become IV Corps commander in late February.²

These GVN deficiencies led to a paradoxical result. A Rand researcher interviewing peasants in the Delta found that growing peasant discontent with the Viet Cong and severe communist combat losses were not, surprisingly, eroding insurgent political strength. On the contrary, communist political influence was actually growing. A weak GVN land reform program accounted for part of this; other factors identified in the Rand study included GVN ineffectiveness against the VCI, with the associated problem of indiscriminate repression of suspected VC, and the disdain for the peasant still displayed, after all these years, by urban-bred administrators. "At least the current Revolutionary Development cadres have not been accused of the misbehaviors often associated with past pacification personnel, but the peasants still consider them ineffectual in comparison with the Viet Cong cadres." The Rand author concluded that "at the village level . . . the revolutionary war in South Vietnam is being fought and lost" by the GVN.³

The study that documented this conclusion did not appear until 1969. Meanwhile, at the beginning of 1968, military considerations dominated allied thinking. President Thieu seemed to think he had General Westmoreland's endorsement of a "pinch out" strategy, in which allied clearing operations beginning in the Mekong Delta would gradually drive communist military forces northward and out of South Vietnam. In point of fact, Westmoreland was concentrating at the moment on I Corps, and especially on the siege of the U.S. Marine bastion at Khe Sanh, near the Lao border just south of the DMZ. In any case, the leadership in Hanoi was about to seize the military initiative. Its decision had come in June 1967, when after apparently vigorous debate the Politburo decided to unleash a countrywide assault in 1968.⁴

Even now, Hanoi's expectations of the offensive remain obscure. It is known that both Ho Chi Minh and General Giap opposed it, on the ground that allied strength in the South precluded a decisive victory. Hanoi's official military history says nothing about the disagreement, asserting only that the North acted on the belief that an offensive against the cities, especially Saigon, Da Nang, and Hue, would spark a "general uprising," with massive desertions from ARVN followed by GVN collapse. Central Resolution 14 of January 1968 is more circumspect, listing final victory as only one of three possible outcomes, the others being a standoff or a U.S. expansion of the war into North Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos.⁵

Resolution 14 was preceded by preliminary guidance to commanders in

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the South, and indications of a major offensive in early 1968 began to trickle into GVN and U.S. intelligence channels in late 1967. Indeed, the station predicted with some accuracy its scale and major targets. But until the very eve of the offensive, none of the reporting specified the exact timing of the assault. As it turned out, Hanoi had picked the early hours of 31 January, the last of the Tet (lunar New Year) holidays. Despite some premature attacks the previous day in Central Vietnam, the offensive achieved nearly complete tactical surprise. Communist forces infiltrated not only the major cities but 110 province and district capitals, in most cases reaching their targets before GVN defenders knew they were there.⁶

VC sappers reached the U.S. Embassy, and Lew Lapham's secretary, living only a few hundred yards away, called him about 0500 hours to report the intense firing. The COS called the station duty officer, who answered lying prone on the seventh-floor station premises. Headquarters already had an inkling of something dramatic, and had cabled a demand for a report. Lapham told the duty officer simply to describe what he was seeing and hearing, and otherwise to stay put. The station's security officer then called, urging the COS to stay home. But the attack on the embassy was quickly beaten off, and by 0900 hours, having been escorted to the office by a heavily armed security detail, Lapham was reporting by phone to George Carver what little he knew about the well-being of the station's personnel.⁷

As it turned out, the Politburo had gravely misjudged the revolutionary temper of the times. Whatever their weaknesses as an instrument of attack, most ARVN and territorial forces fought tenaciously in their own defense. In addition, the masses that Hanoi had hoped would respond to the offensive with a revolutionary uprising remained firmly astride the fence. The allied advantage in firepower quickly turned the tide, and except for Hue, where communist forces held out for three weeks, ARVN took only a few days to clear the cities and towns of the overextended VC forces.⁸

The urban focus of the Tet offensive meant that cadre program installations in the province towns got more attention from the enemy than teams operating in the hamlets. According to early reporting from the field, the only province in which the VC made pacification operations a major target was Ninh Thuan, on the coast in lower Central Vietnam. There the VC had concentrated "their destructive efforts against all [officially pacified] hamlets . . . currently not protected by RD Teams," avoiding those with teams still in residence.⁹

Many provincial advisers saw their installations come under determined assault. At My Tho, in the Mekong Delta, the defenders of the agency compound fought off VC attackers who destroyed the separate Census-Grievance

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Scene in Hue after the Viet Cong Tet offensive, March 1968. (Courtesy of Evan Parker.)

and RD Cadre offices and seized and damaged the RD warehouse. Further south, at Rach Gia, the PRU helped defend the town while the RD Cadre advisers' compound took fifteen B-40 rocket-propelled grenades, which knocked out radio communications and heavily damaged the advisers' house. In an oddly successful departure from conventional defensive practice, the advisers themselves survived without casualties when, as the station later reported, they "took cover safely on the roof." By 2 February, the RD Cadre advisers had moved to the MACV compound, while the Phoenix advisers and seventeen PRU cadres defended their own facility.¹⁰

At the Kien Tuong Province capital of Moc Hoa, adjacent to the Plain of Reeds in the upper Delta, the VC chose three major targets, the Phoenix and RD Cadre compounds and the province chief's residence. Automatic weapons fire from the guards at the Phoenix compound foiled an attempt, presumably by infiltrated sappers, to breach the wall with explosives. Meanwhile, four RD Cadre groups, fortuitously assembled in Moc Hoa despite the holiday, were ordered to defend the town's southeast perimeter, which took the brunt of the

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VC attack. The Kien Tuong PRU, the “only aggressive troops in the city,” then counterattacked, and in one skirmish wiped out a VC squad.¹¹

In Quang Tin Province in Central Vietnam, the PRU attacked a machine gun position in a neighboring compound that had been occupied by the VC after the ARVN defenders there fled. After two days, the Quang Tin PRU had killed twenty-three attackers and captured nineteen weapons, including a recoilless rifle. In beleaguered Hue, fifty PRU cadres repelled five attacks by two VC companies before withdrawing when ammunition ran short. Farther north, the VC assault also threatened to overrun the Quang Tri Province capital. The CIA province adviser there won the Intelligence Star by organizing and leading the defense of his compound.¹²

In one case, the VC offensive shocked an ineffective program into life. In Phuoc Tuy Province, a PRU that had “left much to be desired” fought its way into the provincial capital to join an Australian adviser, later killed, and “a handful of faithful guards” defending the RD Cadre compound. The chaotic state of communications intensified the disruption and confusion: two days after the offensive began, the Saigon Station had not heard from eighteen of its thirty-nine provincial representations in the three lower corps areas.¹³

The initial reaction, after the GVN held firm, was one of elation. The diverse pacification teams had performed reasonably well, in Lapham’s judgment, and few if any Vung Tau-trained cadres had defected. The only disappointment arose from the absence of precise intelligence warning, and this produced, as Lapham put it, a countervailing sense of “despondence.” Still, the station interpreted the Tet offensive as a sign of desperation in Hanoi: Why would the Politburo risk catastrophic losses if it thought it was winning? And if it wasn’t winning, the pacification programs were coming to maturity at a moment that promised important gains for the GVN.¹⁴

The Tet offensive cost the communists some 32,000 men killed and almost 6,000 captured, more than half the forces engaged. Most of the attackers had come from local units and their guerrilla support network, for Hanoi had decided to commit local forces, in most areas, while holding main force units in reserve. The military defeat also gravely weakened the communist administrative and political organization, the so-called VCI, many of whose members had been reassigned to the local forces participating in the offensive. In addition to the guerrillas and cadres lost in combat, the local organization in some localities was virtually extirpated. In Nha Trang, the city’s entire Communist Party committee surfaced to support the attack on the city, and when the assault failed, all its members were arrested. The VCI suffered similar if not quite such crippling losses also in Pleiku and Quang Tri.¹⁵



Targets of the 1968 Tet offensive. A military defeat for the Viet Cong, the assault succeeded in paralyzing GVN pacification efforts for several months.

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Allied casualties were relatively light. ARVN lost about 2,000 men and the United States around 1,000. The cadre programs themselves lost fewer than 130 killed, with about 1,000 more still missing in mid-February. Nevertheless, even though cadre field operations suffered only scattered attacks, the Tet offensive brought the pacification process to an abrupt halt. One problem was friendly fire. "Ironically," the station reported, "the most severe destruction in pacification areas came from friendly air and artillery." This included showplaces like Cam Nam Island, off the coast from Hoi An in Quang Nam Province, which "was levelled by GVN air on 6 February with napalm and 750 pound bombs." Another and more prevalent effect derived from the timing of the attack, which came with many cadres in all three programs absent for the Tet holidays. The chaos produced by simultaneous attacks on so many administrative centers made it hard to reassemble even those cadre teams whose leadership was on hand and ready to get them back into action.¹⁶

Finally, and most visibly damaging, the GVN's anxiety for its urban constituency, doubtless reinforced by its reflexively defensive stance, prompted it to redeploy most of the armed cadres into defensive positions in and around the towns. This retreat into a defensive crouch, just as the VCI had taken devastating losses, produced a political vacuum in the countryside. The withdrawal of the RDC groups mocked GVN pretensions as the protector of loyal villagers just when the decimation of the VCI was eroding its reputation as a ubiquitous, indestructible force in the countryside. In mid-February, the station thought it might be weeks before it could definitively assess the effects of the Tet offensive on pacification. In the meantime, however, the shrunken GVN rural presence threatened to neutralize the pacification programs, which the station thought "had appeared to be gaining momentum." The problem arose not so much from the offensive itself as the GVN's reaction: "The program faltered primarily as the result of GVN command options, which were exercised at the expense of the program."¹⁷

One station observer insisted that pacification cadres now huddled in the cities of Vietnam, along with their supporting territorial security forces, must return to the countryside now. "Every day that the VC are allowed uncontested refuge in the villages and hamlets of Vietnam, free to recruit, to terrorize, to recover from the monumental losses inflicted upon them in their attacks on the urban centers, will delay and make more difficult military victory over the communist insurgency and a true national reconstruction for South Vietnam." Three weeks later, the sense of urgency had grown: "We must somehow provide for a lasting security and GVN presence in the countryside. If we do not do so, soon, we stand to lose the countryside to the VC by default." Mean-

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while, the GVN mimicked Ngo Dinh Diem's reliance on administrative controls to preserve its authority. On 1 March, it restored an early Diem policy when it replaced hamlet and village elections with the appointment of local officials by Saigon.¹⁸

The Tet Offensive as an Intelligence Failure

The station's agonizing over the net effect of the Tet offensive concerned itself remarkably little with the extent and implications of the absence of early warning. The deployment of some 70,000 men from staging areas adjacent to urban centers can hardly have gone totally unremarked by the peasantry, and holiday leaves of absence presumably did not totally paralyze GVN intelligence and the Census-Grievance program. In any case, communist preparations must have begun well before the holidays. The vacuum of intelligence on these preparations—especially on the staging of VC forces for the assault—cried out for an explanation, but the station did not ask what it might imply about the peasants who could have supplied tactical warning.¹⁹

George Allen, the most experienced of CIA's Vietnam experts, recalled assuming that the Tet holidays themselves would remain inviolate. Available intelligence had suggested that the communists were not ready to strike before Tet, and Allen and other observers therefore expected an offensive after the holidays. The resulting surprise included not only the scope of the assault but its timing. Few if any of the myriad sources on local VC activity said anything about communist forces massing in their respective areas. And CIA did not learn until they appeared in combat that many VC, even guerrillas, were now equipped with AK-47 assault rifles later found to have been shipped by the Chinese through the Cambodian port of Sihanoukville. Reflecting on the paucity of pre-Tet reporting, Allen later concluded that it illustrated the superficial impact, to that date, of the pacification programs.²⁰

B. E. (Bob) Layton, a member of the station analytic element staffed by the Directorate of Intelligence, judged that the rigor of communist security measures might reasonably have been expected to prevent advance notice of the intended timing. But, like George Allen, he thought that, given the proliferation of sources reporting to the police and the military, and to pacification officials as well, there should have been voluminous warnings at the tactical level as VC forces moved into position. The rarity of such warning persuaded Layton, too, of a greater peasant disposition toward fence-sitting than quantitative pacification measurements had encouraged American officials to accept.²¹

Instances of unequivocal peasant support to the GVN against the approach-

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ing assault forces only highlighted their rarity. In heavily VC-influenced Quang Ngai Province, the residents of a hamlet in Binh Son District sheltered the members of the assigned RDC group as a VC battalion passed through, on the night of 30 January, en route to attack Quang Ngai City. In the morning, the local VC surfaced to conduct an anti-GVN demonstration that the inhabitants boycotted, preferring instead to help identify the leaders of the 300-odd agitators, promptly rounded up at gunpoint by the RD cadres and the local Popular Forces. This netted the VC district chief and ten other ranking cadres; meanwhile, an accompanying guerrilla force suffered twenty-six dead and nearly as many weapons lost as it tried to escape. Had this episode represented the rule rather than the exception, the Tet offensive would have produced a qualitative jump in the authority of the GVN relative to that of the VC in the countryside.²²

Only in the police context did the station explicitly address the question of an intelligence failure. An assessment in late March deplored the breakdown of the informant system in Saigon, finding it “incredible that among the 250 or more agents and informants under the city police, not one provided accurate and detailed information on the movement of Viet Cong into Saigon in preparation for the Tet attack.” By way of solution, the station proposed to recruit more and better informants, and to spend \$300,000 to equip them with radios intended to ensure early warning of subsequent infiltration.²³

In point of fact, there had been at least one warning of the attack on Saigon. As part of its effort to determine communist intentions, the station had asked a police chief in a neighboring province about VC troop movements. He responded with a 29 January prediction of an imminent attack on the provincial capital as part of a nationwide offensive. But the information never reached either the province defense forces or the local MACV or CIA advisers, and the provincial MACV intelligence adviser died in the subsequent Tet attack. In any case, a single report, surrounded by voluminous “mushy” reporting and a “constant flow of . . . unfounded rumors” about a possible attack probably would not have sufficed to provoke a nationwide alert.²⁴

Reaction to the Tet Offensive

Operating officials in the field could always find examples of competence and courage in GVN performance which, if they became standard practice, would invigorate ARVN, win the allegiance of the countryside, and tip the balance against the insurgency and the North Vietnamese invasion. Observers in Washington looked more at net results, and at the U.S. political context in which

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trends in Vietnam were evolving. From this perspective, the allied military victory at Tet was overshadowed by the paralysis of the GVN that followed it, and the consequent prospect of an indefinite standoff between Saigon and Hanoi.

In late February 1968, JCS chairman General Earle Wheeler asked the president for 206,000 more U.S. troops to exploit the communists' military defeat at Tet. But he succeeded only in igniting a volatile public mood. As an army historian put it, "to some it appeared that Westmoreland needed more troops to stave off defeat; to others the additional forces represented the continuation of a bankrupt strategy that offered no hope of victory." In March, Robert Kennedy joined Senator Eugene McCarthy (D-MN) as an anti-war candidate in a rare challenge to a sitting president for his party's nomination. Clark Clifford, who had just replaced Robert McNamara as secretary of Defense, concluded that the war could not be won by any politically feasible means, and recommended negotiations with Hanoi. On 31 March 1968, Johnson rejected the troop request and curtailed the aerial bombing of North Vietnam. He called for negotiations with Hanoi, and announced that he would not stand for reelection.²⁵

On 31 March, hours before Lyndon Johnson's announcement, General Westmoreland hosted a joint commanders' conference at Nha Trang. There he tried to persuade the ARVN leadership to join in a general counteroffensive to reestablish the GVN's position in the countryside before the communists could make good their Tet losses. But President Thieu displayed his characteristic distaste for risk-taking, even to exploit an opportunity. A second wave of VC attacks in early May, although confined to the Saigon area and three provinces in the north and quickly beaten off, no doubt reinforced his conviction about the priority of the cities and main roads.²⁶

GVN performance in the provinces reflected these priorities. In May and again in November, the station complained to the MRD cadre chief, Colonel Khoi, about RDC groups being ignored by the provincial functionaries who represented the Saigon ministries responsible for agriculture, education, public health, and public works. "An Xuyen Province reports that the technical cadres there have completely avoided the RD hamlets since the Tet offensive." Repeated requests for building materials, school supplies, and medical services had gone unanswered, and the agency adviser concluded that "Saigon appointees" cared little about the welfare of the province. The story was similar in Vinh Binh, Ba Xuyen, Bac Lieu, Chuong Thien, and other provinces.²⁷

CIA had earlier told Khoi that part of the problem lay with RDC program management, which had failed to educate the regular government ministries in the mission of the RDC groups. Ministerial functionaries often did not under-

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stand that the RD cadres sought only to facilitate, not replace, the “material and technical assistance” of the line ministries. The station urged Colonel Khoi to distribute to the provincial services the “criterion handbooks” that guided the social and economic development activities of the RD cadres. Station management had, at this point, so little confidence in its Vietnamese RDC counterparts that it felt compelled to specify the precise bureaucratic channels through which they should route this material.²⁸

The cadre groups themselves were sometimes not much better. The Quang Ngai adviser noted that forty-four RDC groups had returned to their assigned hamlets, thirty-five of them feeling safe enough to stay overnight. But they were doing little about the VCI or about organizing hamlet militias. Like his colleagues elsewhere, their CIA adviser thought this reflected their preference to imitate ARVN and the regular civilian bureaucracy, seeing themselves as an elite entitled to remain “aloof from the people.” Where RDC groups provided local security, they were “accepted for that reason, and no other.” Often, unfortunately, they failed to protect even themselves, for “they are not motivated to fight, [considering this] the job of the military.”²⁹

More optimistic word came out of some of the other provinces. In Quang Nam, thirty-one of thirty-four teams had returned to their hamlets, where they were busy with tasks ranging from census-taking to digging latrines. Neither the reporting from Quang Nam nor a similarly upbeat account from Tay Ninh assessed the effect of all this activity on peasant loyalties, nor did the headquarters summary. This lacuna left open the question whether the Quang Ngai experience was atypical, or the adviser’s judgment excessively pessimistic, or whether the reporting from Quang Nam and Tay Ninh confused busywork with progress.³⁰

Of the other three I Corps provinces, only Quang Tri RDC management was moving aggressively to reassert the GVN presence in hamlets scheduled for pacification. In Thua Thien, just one of three district chiefs with RDC groups assigned to them demonstrated any interest in the program. In Quang Tin, south of Da Nang, the province chief worried only about urban security and the hamlets around Tam Ky, the capital. The adviser commiserated with the local Revolutionary Development chief, a good man but helpless to overcome his superiors’ indifference to extending the GVN’s authority: “At a time when GVN influence is desired and most needed in the countryside, the RD Program is being slowly strangled.” But the bottom line remained hard to draw, for the campaign against the VCI had picked up some momentum. Census-Grievance was still active, and the new Phung Hoang committee was integrating its holdings for a renewed effort. Furthermore, the militia program

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was getting more attention in Quang Tin than in most other provinces: at the beginning of March, some 2,700 volunteers had just been trained and armed for service around Tam Ky and in two of the districts.³¹

The headquarters summary abstained from comment not only on RD Cadre progress but on the apparent decay of Census-Grievance in II Corps. In Khanh Hoa Province, according to the adviser there, the program was failing because “the rural people feel that the program is full of ‘American spies’ and are reluctant to cooperate or respond to . . . questioning [about VC supply caches].” Unlike his Khanh Hoa counterpart, who apparently saw C-G as no more than an interrogation mechanism, the adviser in Phu Yen displayed some awareness of the motivational core of C-G. But he attached no evident importance to the fact that “aspirations satisfied since the beginning of 1968 average eight percent.” With respect to grievances, he seemed almost to applaud the fact that these had been “almost nonexistent since the Province Chief made it clear to all that this was a time of war and many difficulties must be expected.”³²

The more perceptive adviser in Ninh Thuan Province described pacification as having reached a “virtual standstill,” with no cooperation between RD cadres and the local military, and cadre discipline so poor that “a vast number [were] wandering around the province at will,” uncontrolled by their supervisors. The same adviser noted the folly of treating a low level of overt VC activity as an indication of GVN control: Tet had exposed previously tranquil Ninh Thuan as a fool’s paradise, in terms of security, with the VC operating at will throughout the province.³³

Other observers still interpreted VC quiescence as a sign of GVN ascendancy. In Bien Hoa Province, just north of Saigon, the station adviser took as proof of “adequate security” in Ninh Trach District the report of RDC groups there that they had seen no VC activity for over a month. This assessment may have overlooked the possibility of surreptitious VC access to, even dominance in, at least some hamlets in the district. Even by the cruder measure of an overt, armed presence, the VC controlled 62 of Bien Hoa’s 200-odd hamlets by day, 13 more at night.³⁴

The strategic importance of III Corps, and its proximity to the material resources and military assets centered in Saigon, might have justified expectations that it would enjoy a more nearly uncontested GVN dominance, after the defeat of the Tet offensive, than more remote areas. That this was not the case emerges from the 1 May summary, containing apparently unedited extracts from provincial and Saigon Station reporting. Although RDC deployments had reached pre-Tet levels by mid-March, security in the corps area had then “continued to deteriorate,” and not only in Bien Hoa Province. Even in Gia

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Revolutionary Development Cadre graduation ceremony, Vung Tau, c. 1968. (Courtesy of Lewis Lapham.)

Dinh Province, surrounding Saigon, only three of ten RDC groups were working in the hamlets scheduled for 1968.³⁵

Stagnant pacification efforts resulted both from residual VC strength and from GVN passivity. Which of these factors predominated remains difficult to determine, and the balance seems to have varied substantially from one province to another. In Phuoc Tuy, the site of the Vung Tau training facility, the VC presence looked like the operative factor. The station feared that “if the cadre teams are forced into their [scheduled] hamlets without a large increase in security, they will most likely be wiped out.” In rice-rich Long An Province, southwest of Saigon, GVN nonfeasance—even outright misfeasance—appeared to be the central problem. The PRU program there was paralyzed while its ferociously combative leader recovered from combat wounds; meanwhile, Census-Grievance managed to produce just twenty-five intelligence reports, accompanied by four grievances and no requests for services, in the course of 9,300 interviews.³⁶

While C-G and PRU languished in Long An, the RD Cadre program there decayed under a corrupt provincial RDC administrator. Until his replacement after a ministerial investigation—the report says nothing about action against him—he had been selling GVN identification cards and falsifying pay records. A personal inspection by the province chief revealed many cadremen absent

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without leave and the remainder unprotected by the territorial forces nominally assigned to them.³⁷

The picture looked less bleak in IV Corps, where the North Vietnamese Army had a smaller presence than in any of the other corps areas. In addition, IV Corps was now commanded by General Thang, who made pacification the heart of his agenda. Judging by the predominance of negative comments even on this area, the difference was a matter only of degree. Thang's bureaucracy came from the same mold as that in the rest of the country, and results in IV Corps, as elsewhere, depended on the energy, honesty, and competence of the military officers and civilian functionaries managing the various pacification resources. This meant stagnation in An Xuyen, Ba Xuyen, Kien Giang, and Kien Hoa provinces. Ba Xuyen had three idle RDC groups, and the adviser there despaired of getting the ARVN regiment he thought necessary if they were to survive in the contested hamlets where they were most needed. Traditionally quiet An Giang Province remained so, and part of Chau Doc was also tranquil, however deceptive the appearance might be. But in Phong Dinh Province, with IV Corps Headquarters at Can Tho, the largest city in the Delta, General Thang saw the programs as beginning again from scratch. He had just rejected a staff recommendation to repeat the pacification process in all the hamlets covered in the past two years; security was too poor, he thought, and he proposed to concentrate on the area within five miles of Can Tho.³⁸

Meanwhile, at the Vung Tau training center, CIA officers worried both about their trainees and about the center's ability to give them adequate instruction in the face of MACV/CORDS demands for quantity. Between April and July, the number of trainees, including those in ancillary programs like Popular Forces instructor training and familiarization for GVN officials, rose from under 8,000 to almost 10,500. Even before this expansion, the station noted that the "quality and attitude of the students were poor," and the ability of the American staff to maintain training standards was being degraded by the loss of translators to the draft and to "resignations for other reasons."³⁹

The senior agency officer at Vung Tau believed that despite these difficulties the Vung Tau emphasis on motivational activity throughout the thirteen weeks of RDC basic training was assuring a "fairly well motivated" graduate. But he doubted the durability of this effect, for experience suggested to him that "motivation and morale tend to drop once the cadre is returned to the provinces." He accounted for this in the familiar terms of security and leadership, pointing to "the often dominant problem of hamlet security, the lack of qualified [RD group] leaders," and especially "the lack of interest in the teams by the provincial and district authorities responsible for the program."⁴⁰

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The CIA chief of the Revolutionary Development office at CORDS added another consideration. American observers, he wrote, had noted how “RD Cadre Groups are . . . shocked out of much of their motivation when they first encounter the apathy of the people in the hamlets.” Accordingly, he recommended to Colonel Khoi’s replacement at MRD that an RDC deployment should follow consultation between the group leadership and the hamlet chief and his council, and should get support from the other GVN elements with primary responsibility for public health, propaganda, and military security.⁴¹

A Cup Half Full?

For the station and the embassy—MACV nursed its usual doubts about irregular forces—the acid test of pacification was still the presence of an effective volunteer hamlet militia. The combination of indigenous VC forces and North Vietnamese Army elements committed to the South presented a force far too large to permit ARVN and the GVN’s territorials to protect every hamlet from communist attack. The only solution, at least while infiltration routes from the North remained open, was a system of hamlet self-defense integrated into an overall scheme of territorial security.⁴²

The GVN had always harbored less confidence than the Americans in the anticommunist predisposition of the villagers. Its agreement in principle on the need for volunteer defenses had been largely nullified by its fear that weapons for the militia would quickly find their way into communist hands. The Tet onslaught briefly overcame this hesitancy, although even then urban areas received priority, and by 31 March 22,000 peasants had been trained, with 5,000 armed. But this flurry soon receded. By mid-May, some province advisers were complaining that requests from well-motivated hamlet leaders for arms and equipment were getting no response from GVN officials, who seemed “reluctant to furnish arms except in a few isolated instances.” Indeed, in Binh Dinh Province, the new II Corps commander confiscated the 200 weapons previously delivered to hamlet militia units.⁴³

In a dispatch dated 20 June, Robert Peart, the CIA officer now in charge of the CORDS cadre division, wearily concluded that the GVN’s reserved attitude extended to the RDC program itself. The national mobilization program so tardily provoked by Tet was being botched by the legislature. Pending legislation on the draft threatened 70 percent of active RD cadres with conscription while sharply limiting the pool of manpower eligible for RD recruitment. In addition, unspecified minor policy differences among U.S. officials, and

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between them and the GVN, had inhibited timely instructions to the field, and “many teams have marked time awaiting orders.”⁴⁴

These delinquencies were presumably remediable, but only with goodwill, and Peart saw the GVN’s approach as marked by “indifference and a lack of empathy . . . at all levels . . . , even among Vietnamese officials who share responsibility for the program.” Lieutenant Colonel Vo Dai Khoi, the stalwart head of the MRD’s Cadre Directorate, had grown increasingly “skeptical of his own government’s true intentions regarding the RD Program.” Tired of “running from one hole in the dike to another,” he had applied for a transfer. Finally, in Peart’s view, increased communist military pressure on RDC groups was not drawing an adequate ARVN response, and the resulting militarization of the RDC program, necessary for its survival, threatened its potential to generate or consolidate peasant commitment to the GVN.⁴⁵

Peart described the difference in perspective between Robert Komer’s plans and programs staff, on the one hand, and the station and Colonel Khoi, on the other. CORDS was proposing “ambitious increases” in cadre recruitment and RDC group formation, to which Khoi, reading RD cadre casualty figures and reports on local security conditions, was responding “with a very jaundiced eye.” The station shared that skepticism, even as Komer and Thieu were talking about halving the size of RDC groups in order to double the number of hamlets covered. To Peart, and presumably to Lew Lapham, chief of station since just before Tet, the proposal to expand RDC coverage begged the question recently posed by headquarters: “Can we really expect to reverse the tide and regain our momentum unless the RDC program enjoys increased help from the various armed forces?”⁴⁶

Peart made the station view explicit: “It is our view . . . that present and probable future security conditions in the countryside preclude a major expansion in the program. Rather they suggest consolidation and renewed efforts to get the Vietnamese military establishment to assume its territorial security responsibilities for [Revolutionary Development].” Evaluating the mind-set of his MRD counterparts, Peart saw Khoi as entirely like-minded and as “responsive to our direction as we would wish.” But General Thang’s provisional replacement as MRD head, Colonel Hoang Van Lac, seemed “enamored of the old Strategic Hamlet program” and appeared to have “little sympathy with efforts to reconstruct Vietnamese society from the grass roots up.” President Thieu’s attitude was equally detached; he seemed to see the RD Cadre simply as a convenient source of manpower for miscellaneous construction projects.⁴⁷

Headquarters reproached the station for having waited so long to convey these ominous portents, especially the prospect of curtailed draft exemption

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for RD cadres. It acknowledged that the COS might have seen the matter as overt grist for the CORDS/embassy reporting mill, not as the substance of covert reporting, but it urged him to ignore this distinction in matters of such importance.⁴⁸

Headquarters also wanted an effort, using station contacts in the legislature, to quash the provisions affecting exemption from the draft. In fact, an effort to do just that was already under way, but to no effect. The exertions of six Lower House members resulted in the changes the station wanted, but when the bill went to President Thieu, he inserted a provision revoking, in effect, the exemption for cadres between twenty-four and thirty-three years of age. It was left to Colonel Khoi to save the day: in his last official act before leaving MRD on 5 July, he negotiated with the Defense Ministry an interpretation of the law that protected currently serving cadres from the draft and allowed some RDC recruiting even in the twenty-four to thirty-three age group.⁴⁹

About a week later, headquarters followed its admonition about reporting protocol with a more general expression of alarm at what it saw as the defeatist tone of the Peart dispatch. Did this list of problems imply “bleak prospects” for pacification, and if so, given the central CIA role, might not this result in “things going sour” for the agency? Of most immediate concern were preparations for a possible conference at Honolulu between Presidents Thieu and Johnson. Headquarters wanted to avoid having CIA counsels conflict with those from the more optimistic CORDS managers, who now included not only Komer but, since April, his new deputy, William Colby.⁵⁰

The station stuck to its guns regarding program weaknesses and the threat they posed to pacification progress, but tried to reassure headquarters that such a recital was not to be taken for a comprehensive assessment. Lapham said he did not in fact consider the longer-term prospects all that bleak. As for the agency’s becoming a scapegoat if pacification failed, he noted that while the cadre programs were generally understood to be CIA creations, pacification as a whole had other dimensions. It if failed, headquarters should be “quick to reject any effort to fix this tag on us.”⁵¹

With respect to divided counsels, Lapham assured headquarters that he had conveyed its views to Komer and Colby on 4 July; at worst, no one could argue that the station sought to undercut Komer in Washington. Lapham then summarized Colby’s argument for a more optimistic prognosis: on 20 June, the day the station transmitted Peart’s pessimistic bottom line, Thieu had issued clear and categorical instructions making corps commanders and province chiefs responsible for cadre operations. Thieu and his national RD Council had mandated other specific organizational refinements, and additional reason

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for hope arose from the partial resurrection of the RD Cadre draft exemption. Addressing the station's principal complaint, the lack of working-level GVN commitment to the cadre programs, Colby noted that this had "plagued allied efforts from the beginning." But he considered local leadership "significantly improved," especially since the recent replacement of many district and province chiefs. Lapham noncommittally judged all of these points "worthy of inclusion in an overall assessment."⁵²

George Carver, Peer De Silva's replacement as special assistant for Vietnam Affairs, was probably the author of headquarters' startled inquiry about program prospects and potential scapegoats. He now brought the exchange to an end with a similarly ambivalent reply to Lapham. He wanted the agency to call the facts as it saw them, he said, and to be ready to "remind our policy making masters that unless the cadre program has solid GVN commitment . . . it is pointless for CIA to tie up [the] extensive assets now committed" to it. But he wanted at the same time to avoid giving any impression "that we are end running senior members of [the] Mission in reporting through our channels. [The] current exercise has been useful in giving us pointers on pitfalls in both directions."⁵³

Despite his reluctance to challenge official optimism in Saigon, Carver adopted the core of the station's position. In a 17 July briefing paper for DCI Helms, he noted that despite the RDC program's growth to more than 58,000 cadres, fewer hamlets had a functioning GVN presence than had been the case before Tet. Carver doubted that the GVN would meet the fiscal 1969 RDC recruiting quota of 22,000, and given the continuing high rate of cadre attrition it seemed unlikely that total numbers would rise in the next six to twelve months. It could not even be assumed that the work of those already on duty would follow program doctrine. Despite a CORDS threat to suspend U.S. support to them, the GVN had just decided to send the next two Vung Tau classes to Gia Dinh Province, where they would spread out into several hundred hamlets around Saigon on a "short term, show the flag, basis."⁵⁴

To CIA observers, pacification activity in the Central Highlands faced similar obstacles. The so-called Truong Son (Annamite chain) RD Cadre program launched in reaction to the September 1964 montagnard rebellion had one advantage over the lowlands program, namely the tribes' aversion to the Viet Cong. But the GVN had even less confidence in an armed montagnard than in an armed Vietnamese villager. Like the earlier CIDG, therefore, the Truong Son program suffered from lack of constructive GVN involvement at the province and district level. A few of the provincial programs enjoyed the active engage-

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ment of the province chief, but the prospect of a more general GVN commitment, as the station saw it, was “not very good.”⁵⁵

As for the montagnards themselves, their culture did not produce many potential cadres capable of carrying a political message, and their variant of the RD mission seems to have consisted of civic action and a contribution to local security. A briefing outline for officers heading for mountain provinces cautioned against excessive expectations. The montagnards were “basically honest, but the leaders have learned from the Viets.” More generally, “despite friendliness and apparent willingness, montagnards are not producers. Do not expect too much.”⁵⁶

The Accelerated Pacification Campaign

Until July 1968, President Thieu had displayed little more enthusiasm for Phung Hoang than for the RDC program. The first GVN endorsement for Phung Hoang had come not from him but from his first prime minister, Nguyen Van Loc. But suppression of the VCI, whatever the disagreements over means of achieving it, always remained a more congenial idea to the GVN than American notions of “revolutionary development.” Even then, it required continual American pressure, especially from Komer and Bill Colby, to get Thieu’s personal endorsement. Finally, on 1 July 1968, Thieu signed a decree, drafted by Colby, mandating a unified civilian-military campaign against the VCI.⁵⁷

The Phung Hoang decree was followed by the inevitable period of organizational adjustments and bureaucratic maneuvering. Corps and division commanders displayed little interest in the program, and Thieu may have been signaling them to get on board when he put it in the hands of a senior general and capable administrator. Tran Thien Khiem had been serving as minister of Interior, and Thieu soon added to his authority by installing him as his new prime minister.⁵⁸

Despite the bureaucratic complications—the continuing lack of a Vietnamese sponsor for PRU was one of them—the Phung Hoang program embodied the same simple concept that had animated the American ICEX initiative a year earlier. The goal remained a unified effort at the district level, run by the District Intelligence and Operations Coordination Center, to collect, collate, and exploit intelligence on the communist political and administrative structure. In practice, this meant getting the district S-2 officer and the Police Special Branch representative working together in the same office, sharing information with each other and disseminating it to the local ARVN commander, if any, and to PRU, RDC groups, the National Police Field Force, and the territorials.⁵⁹

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Phung Hoang had not yet emerged from the shakedown phase when, in August, the communists launched the last of the three waves of attacks they mounted in 1968. Smaller than the May offensive, it was widely anticipated, and GVN and U.S. forces quickly defeated it. The VC lost some 5,400 men, many to attacks by tactical aircraft and B-52 bombers.⁶⁰

Aggregate communist losses during the three campaigns were catastrophic. Colonel Bui Tin, who accepted the South Vietnamese surrender in 1975, later said that General Vo Nguyen Giap, commander of the North Vietnamese Army, acknowledged a military defeat: the losses had been “staggering and a complete surprise,” and communist forces in the South “were nearly wiped out” during the course of 1968. Although “nearly wiped out” seems a considerable exaggeration—the VCI alone, excluding communist military forces, still numbered some 82,000 people at the end of 1968—the VC grip on the countryside had been gravely weakened.⁶¹

Many years later, Bui Tin denied what most American analysts had concluded, that Hanoi had intended the Tet offensive to produce final victory. Contradicting what Hanoi’s military historians were saying at about the same time, he claimed that its main objective was not a final decision, but only to bend American public opinion, in an election year, in favor of a U.S. withdrawal. Forcing General Westmoreland to relax his pressure on North Vietnamese forces in the South had been only a secondary goal. And in fact, the negotiations with the North proposed by Lyndon Johnson in late March began in Paris in mid-May. Whether as part of a calculated strategy or only as a reflexive response to its battlefield losses, Hanoi had now adopted, for the moment, an essentially political approach in the South.⁶²

The renewed political struggle aimed at extending the overt communist presence in preparation for a negotiated settlement to the war. As the instrument of this strategy, the communists began setting up so-called liberation committees. By one American estimate, about one-third of the hamlets classified by the GVN as either contested or relatively secure now harbored such a committee.⁶³

American and GVN officials understood the political implications of a negotiated settlement as well as the communists did, and in mid-September, Komer won General Abrams’s approval for a campaign to expand the GVN’s hold on territory and population. At a MACV commanders’ conference on 20 September, Bill Colby proposed a coordinated campaign by all allied civil and military forces to assert GVN control before the cease-fire that he expected the communists to propose for Tet 1969. Abrams’s corps advisers doubted the GVN capacity to respond quickly enough for a short-term program to have

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real impact. But Abrams—who had replaced Westmoreland in the spring—was convinced of the need for an aggressive GVN response to the Tet offensive, and he supported Colby.⁶⁴

The CIA station was not directly involved in the 1 October session at which Ambassadors Bunker, Komer, and Colby worked to sell President Thieu on a preemptive land grab to replace his cautious emphasis on urban security and consolidation of the GVN's existing rural presence. The station, perhaps inhibited by its reservations about immediate pacification prospects, did not comment on the idea to headquarters, so far as is known, but George Carver welcomed it. MACV, meanwhile, was busily proselyting among its ARVN contacts. When JGS chairman Cao Van Vien told Thieu that the GVN could take over more than the 1,000 hamlets proposed by Komer, the president bowed to the pressure, and set 1 November 1968 as the launch date for what the Americans called the Accelerated Pacification Campaign (APC).⁶⁵

Planning for the three-month campaign proceeded on the assumption that the GVN could redeploy half the territorial forces and cadre groups from “secure” to “contested” hamlets without losing ground where they were already working. Others concerned with Vietnam policy joined George Carver in welcoming the initiative, although Assistant Secretary of State William Bundy worried about Komer's reliance on the controversial statistics of the Hamlet Evaluation System to measure results. Bundy had one other reservation: although the allies must challenge the communists' liberation committees in the countryside, they should do so without having the APC look like a simple pre-cease-fire land grab.⁶⁶

For Robert Komer, as for his deputy Bill Colby and COS Lew Lapham, it *was* more than a land grab. To the doubters at MACV and in Washington, Komer insisted that precisely quantified targets and firm deadlines “were not half as ambitious as they sound.” They also were not the material of a mere numbers game, but essential to success: “We can and must achieve victory. By Tet 69 [just before the scheduled end of the APC], we can make it clear that the enemy has been defeated.” By Komer's own measurements, the APC goal called for pacification progress at four times the rate achieved in the six months before the Tet offensive. The question remained whether communist battlefield losses had weakened the Viet Cong to the point that an ever-hesitant President Thieu and his defense-oriented regime could effectively exploit them.⁶⁷

Whether it represented a land grab serving narrow tactical purposes or a more ambitious bid for decisive victory, the APC reinforced the decline of pacification's political dimension, a trend that began with the post-Tet emphasis on the RD cadres' security role. An effort to pacify 1,000 hamlets in ninety days essentially abandoned the painstaking RDC approach aimed at demon-

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strating GVN benevolence and attracting active peasant loyalty. Komer had, apparently, no reservations about this: he had scribbled the word “baloney” next to Bill Colby’s assertion, in a defense of plans to expand the RDC, that after a cease-fire the cadres would be the “major political instrument available to confront the VC political apparatus.” In Hau Nghia Province, for example, the APC entirely dispensed with Revolutionary Development or “any sort of social transformation.” It relied instead on the American and ARVN Twenty-fifth divisions, whose deployment in support of the APC meant, to a USOM provincial adviser, “only occupation, not pacification.”⁶⁸

By the end of 1968, the APC managed, by conventional measurements, to double the “secured” population in Hau Nghia, while the portion under VC control dropped by half. But Hau Nghia illustrated the fragility of progress based on a preponderance of force. The extension of Saigon’s authority there depended on assets introduced from outside the province—not merely the ARVN and U.S. divisions, but also most GVN functionaries, RD cadres, and even replacements for the Regional and Popular Forces units. The GVN’s inability to engage the populace in contributing to its own protection from the Viet Cong meant, in the words of one close observer of Hau Nghia, that “the GVN was never able to convert Front weakness into government strength.”⁶⁹

APC reliance on military sweep operations and on destroying the VCI through the Phung Hoang program reflected the absence of resources with which to expand the effort to win peasant allegiance to the GVN. Making a virtue of necessity, U.S. management in Saigon persuaded itself that the so-called county fair, the detention and interrogation of an entire community, might actually be welcomed. One needed only to explain the exercise to the affected villagers and entertain them with performances by cultural and drama teams. Meanwhile, houses would be searched and the population screened for VC suspects. Recommending this practice to provincial advisers, Saigon cited an example from Phong Dinh Province in which a large group detained for several hours applauded after the province chief of staff explained the beneficent purposes of the operation. Some or even most of these villagers may in fact have wanted an end to the communist presence, but American eagerness to interpret their courtesy as a spontaneous sign of enthusiasm helps explain the perennial absence of rigorous criteria for evaluating peasant loyalties.⁷⁰

Divergent Prognoses

So long as the enemy remained the exclusive focus of attention, a forecast of the outcome could rest on an interpretation of order of battle statistics. After

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the arrival of U.S. ground forces, and then the defeat of the Tet offensive, these numbers greatly favored the GVN and its allies. But this quantitative approach said little or nothing about the energy and resilience of the competing Vietnamese political systems, and there were occasional efforts to arrive at some kind of qualitative judgment.

Colonel Tran Van Hai, director general of the National Police, made an attempt at such an assessment in late 1968. Just before the Accelerated Pacification Campaign got under way, Hai outlined to the station what he saw as the five major GVN weaknesses which, if not remedied, would give eventual victory to the communists. First was the government's inability to control the villages and hamlets, many of which now contained a VC liberation committee. The VC infrastructure was virtually intact, from district level up, and even below that it was "more than a match for anything the GVN can field." Second came the GVN's political failure in the schools. There, Hai said, "the best and most dedicated students are also dedicated communists," and their role models among professors and elected officials were "invariably Marxists." Pro-communist students working in the post-Tet refugee centers were winning the loyalty of the refugees while GVN relief officials "walked around in white shirts, looked down on the refugees and, in some cases, profited from relief supplies."⁷¹

The Buddhists constituted a third GVN vulnerability. Whether their militant leader Thich Tri Quang was or was not a communist struck Hai as irrelevant, for he and his followers would cause trouble simply out of the conviction that the Buddhists should run the country. In addition, endemic corruption made it impossible for the GVN to engage any significant portion of the idealistic young. Finally, in Hai's judgment, general Vietnamese indifference to the responsibilities of citizenship had "made a shambles of the constitutional system." Whatever the theoretical merits of democracy, the GVN version could not compete with the communists, who had precisely the "discipline and cohesiveness which the democratic forces lack."⁷²

The station saw Hai's pessimism as exaggerated, and the despondent police chief probably did in fact overstate the pro-communist sympathies of the students and the ambitions of the Buddhists. But the station acknowledged the problem in the countryside, even while taking some comfort in the perception that the still-formidable VCI was now weaker than in the past. On corruption and the weakness of the constitutional system, the station hedged: it thought Hai's concern overstated, but saw "no question that much needs to be done on both fronts."⁷³

Before the APC began, the communists had already pulled the bulk of their

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main forces out of contact and into refuge in safe areas, especially along the border with Laos and Cambodia. The massive commitment of allied ground and air power forced the withdrawal of most of what remained, and by the crudest of pacification criteria—the frequency of VC attacks—the APC made substantial if uneven gains. But as of mid-December, according to the station, it had not seriously damaged the VC infrastructure. At the midpoint of the campaign, “despite the number of lower-level VCI neutralized, the hard core command cadres remain largely unhurt and inadequately identified for effective action against them.” Indeed, despite working-level attrition and morale problems, especially in urban areas, these cadres were busy with political programs designed to legitimize the VC, disrupt pacification, and “undermine and displace the GVN political structure.”⁷⁴

The communists credited Phoenix activity with making serious inroads on their rural organization—in so doing, they seem to have applied the label to all military and security operations that affected the VCI—and Liberation Radio exhorted the VC to “crush the head of the venomous snake Phoenix.” But the Viet Cong continued to set up liberation committees throughout the South; by one count, they grew from 397 in September 1968 to 3,367 in mid-January 1969. More generally, CIA in Saigon saw a “reemphasis of . . . the guerrilla and militia role in people’s revolutionary warfare, and reconstitution of guerrilla forces depleted or upgraded to regular status in support of the Tet and subsequent military offensives.”⁷⁵

The attrition that provoked the communists’ denunciation of Phoenix included some 7,000 casualties during the three months of the APC; another 8,600 cadres defected. This did not result in a proportionate decline in the numbers of surviving Viet Cong, whom U.S. intelligence estimated at 82,000 in the wake of the APC. The unreliability and ambiguity of the statistics—the very definition of a member of the infrastructure remained contentious until the end—left open the question of the Viet Cong’s apparent resilience. The station did not at the time ask to what extent this demonstrated a continuing ability to recruit replacements and to what extent it reflected the neutralization of people no more than marginally involved in the movement. The only point of consensus was that of a VC infrastructure left essentially intact.⁷⁶

The capacity of the Phoenix program to pose a decisive challenge to the Viet Cong infrastructure was in any case limited by the perceived need to treat communist suspects not as prisoners of war but as offenders against the criminal law. GVN facilities for detention and judicial processing never met the demand, with the result that while innocent villagers sometimes suffered lengthy confinement awaiting trial, important figures in the underground were

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released in the confusion of an overtaxed system. Modest sentences—a maximum of two years for membership in the VCI—and the reluctance of some GVN officials to prosecute VC suspects well connected in Saigon also contributed to the appearance of a revolving-door judicial process that infuriated many U.S. provincial advisers.⁷⁷

With the Accelerated Pacification Campaign still under way, CIA in Saigon did not doubt that the repressive aspect had already inflicted material damage on the VC organization. The neutralization numbers, reflecting defections, arrests, and casualties, might be imprecise, but they were undeniably substantial, and the communists themselves acknowledged the inroads made by the Phung Hoang program. With respect to Revolutionary Development, however, the station suddenly adopted a detached stance that contrasted sharply with its traditionally active and intellectually independent engagement in pacification issues.

In early January 1969, with the end of the APC a month away, the station had to contribute to a National Intelligence Estimate on pacification mandated by President Johnson for the incoming Nixon administration. Perhaps reflecting the style and priorities of new COS Theodore Shackley, the response relied on Hamlet Evaluation System figures for its conclusion that “the pacification program is achieving statistical goals in many important respects.” Shackley’s cautious and not entirely consistent judgments could be used to support either a pessimistic or an optimistic prognosis, as exemplified in his description of the GVN forces assigned to pacification security. In one paragraph, these were “better armed and . . . generally performing well.” In another, many of them were still “sub-marginal in combat performance,” and their dispersal under the APC rubric may have placed an “untenable burden . . . on these few, not yet competent, security forces.”⁷⁸

The new COS expressed “guarded optimism” for the favorable outcome of an effort whose goal he defined as “an acceptable political settlement.” He cited other persisting problems: a “political vacuum” in the countryside, weakness and corruption in GVN leadership, and inadequate facilities to process arrested Viet Cong suspects. Shackley endorsed the objective of gradual U.S. withdrawal from the pacification programs, but specified that GVN “competence, integrity and leadership are not yet sufficient for them to go it alone.” The GVN must gradually accept full responsibility for both funding and management, but the pace of U.S. withdrawal had to match Vietnamese capacities. With respect to prospects for the next year, even a guardedly optimistic outlook assumed political stability under President Thieu and a continuing GVN commitment to the “‘one-war’ approach” of the campaign.⁷⁹

The station was not the only element of the U.S. Mission required to pro-

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vide an assessment for the new administration, whose concern about the outlook in Vietnam had been provoked by a pessimistic CIA study of the GVN's armed forces done in December 1968. Bill Colby, in charge of CORDS after Komer's departure in late 1968, and Ellsworth Bunker submitted their own prognoses, in which they evaluated APC gains as durable and GVN weaknesses as remediable. General Abrams thought the CIA unfair to judge Saigon's forces on the basis of their capacity to "go it alone," for the MACV support programs, all of them making substantial progress, envisaged no such requirement in the short term.⁸⁰

Although he defended the design and scale of current efforts, Abrams did not flinch from a bottom line that recognized the unfavorable balance of forces. He judged that even after the modernization of GVN forces, scheduled for completion in 1972, Saigon would be able to contain indigenous VC forces only with U.S. materiel and advisory support. And no matter how successful ARVN modernization might prove to be, it would never remove the requirement for U.S. forces to help hold off the North Vietnamese. GVN forces were "simply . . . not capable of attaining the level of self-sufficiency and overwhelming force superiority that would be required to counter combined Viet Cong insurgency and North Vietnamese Army main force offensives." About this, as Abrams saw it, nothing could be done.⁸¹

Even in the narrower context of pacification, many in Washington doubted the permanence of GVN gains under the APC. The State and Defense departments and CIA all noted the campaign's heavy reliance on U.S. ground forces, and CIA questioned the GVN's ability to cope with the political threat posed by the VCI. Even so, the communists continued to suffer serious military attrition. In February 1969, they launched the latest in the series of offensives that began at Tet 1968. On a larger scale than the campaigns of May and August 1968, the latest round found the allies well prepared, and the communists absorbed grievous losses. During the five weeks of this wave of attacks, communist battle deaths doubled to a weekly rate of 5,000, according to MACV figures, with 1,000 military defectors. Attrition of the VCI was at that point costing the communists a claimed 500 cadres a week. The numbers might have been inflated by optimistic interpretations of inconclusive evidence, but there is no doubt that adherence to a tactic of so-called high points was costing the communists very dearly.⁸²

The balance of forces equation at the end of the APC thus remained indeterminate. Despite this, and General Abrams's judgment about the requirement for an indefinite commitment of U.S. forces, President Nixon had already decided to begin a gradual reduction in U.S. forces when he sent Defense Secre-

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tary Melvin Laird to Vietnam in early March 1969. In Saigon, Laird acknowledged the domestic political pressures for a withdrawal, and instructed General Abrams to accelerate all activity aimed at turning the war over to the GVN.⁸³

Laird concluded after the trip that the GVN did in fact have the potential to survive on its own. MACV commanders were more interested in combat operations, he thought, than in helping the Vietnamese to defend themselves, and the scale of the U.S. military presence stifled Vietnamese initiative. Whether this reflected genuine conviction or only political expediency, a profession of faith in the South Vietnamese allowed adopting a policy of gradual withdrawal. Improvements in GVN capabilities would ostensibly determine the timing of a process that was in fact to be driven primarily by domestic U.S. politics. All U.S. government agencies with responsibilities for Vietnam agreed that the South could not by itself permanently withstand combined VC–North Vietnamese pressure. Nevertheless, National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger instructed the Defense Department to submit a plan for the gradual withdrawal of U.S. ground forces beginning on 1 July 1969.⁸⁴

Presidents Nixon and Thieu met at Midway Island on 8 June 1969. With a U.S. force reduction now a domestic political imperative, Nixon announced that 25,000 U.S. troops would leave Vietnam by the end of August. North Vietnam had promised no reciprocal withdrawal, but it was clear that, while Nixon's announcement dealt only with combat forces, he was signaling a more general withdrawal. To U.S. officials directing or advising other efforts, such as the pacification programs, the handwriting was on the wall.⁸⁵

The Midway Island conference coincided with the end of a “national congress” sponsored by Hanoi at which the National Liberation Front and other front organizations had proclaimed a Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG) for South Vietnam. This move completed the creation of a formal apparatus, launched in 1968 with the establishment of village and hamlet Revolutionary Committees, designed to represent the communists' claims to ownership of population and territory in the South. As Secretary Laird was telling Abrams to prepare for withdrawal, COSVN Resolution 9 codified the reversion to political organizing and guerrilla warfare that Tet losses and the APC had forced upon it. This represented more than an admission of weakness, however, for it brought revolutionary tactics in the countryside into support of the strategic opportunity created by President Johnson's decision to try the negotiating table. The communists no longer aimed at either immediate military conquest or a general uprising. Instead, they now sought to create at least the simulacrum of a functioning government to compete with the GVN in rural South Vietnam. The showdown could wait until after a military cease-fire.⁸⁶

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In retrospect, Hanoi's 1968 return to a focus on its hamlet and village organization seems to have offered an opportunity for the GVN and its American patrons to exploit allied military superiority in expanded pacification operations. General Abrams did in fact devote more attention than Westmoreland had to the rural security aspects of the conflict, and new GVN initiatives in land reform and hamlet self-defense were to follow. But the drive to compete with the Viet Cong in the political mobilization of the countryside faltered after the Tet offensive, partly because of CIA's withdrawal from a leadership role.¹

That withdrawal had begun just as President Johnson announced his decision not to run for reelection. As with CIDG in 1962, the agency's program innovations and its managerial and logistic flexibility had drawn it into a lead role that its relatively small size made impossible to sustain. There were now almost 1,000 people in the Saigon Station, most of them, including 400 contractors and people detailed from other agencies, managing or supporting provincial operations. The various cadre programs employed almost 54,000 Vietnamese, and the station was paying about half of the 10,000 informants run by the Police Special Branch.²

In preparation since late 1967, CIA's disengagement had begun when the Defense Department assumed funding responsibility for the RDC program on 1 April 1968. At Komer's insistence, the responsibility for operational management remained with the agency, for the time being, with the station running the program on behalf of CORDS. As early as February, only a month after the Tet offensive, the chief of Vietnam operations at headquarters, Douglas Blaufarb, was anticipating instructions to reduce the hiring of contract employees for pacification. But Komer still resisted any suggestion of a diminished CIA role

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in pacification, and military personnel detailed to the station continued for the moment to supplement rather than replace agency officers.³

Two months later, Defense was hoping to transfer at least the financial burden to the Vietnamese, and there ensued a protracted debate with MACV over the possible disruption of the RDC program once it had to compete with other GVN budget priorities. Only in the PRU program did the agency commitment continue to grow: the Tet experience had strengthened the station's argument for more teams and more firepower, and the interagency 303 Committee approved an additional \$5.7 million, including \$800,000 for automatic weapons and funding to expand the program from 3,500 to 6,000 men.⁴

If Tet reinforced the perception of an indispensable PRU, it weakened the CIA commitment to Revolutionary Development. Station reporting and the witness of returning case officers led headquarters to ask whether RD cadres now constituted anything more than just "another type of overt security force." If not, could they become something more? And if the answer to that too was negative, why not merge them with the MACV-supported Popular Forces?⁵

The station's reply to this pointed query has not been found. But Lew Lapham was in any case about to leave Saigon, and the CIA role in pacification would change with his departure. Meanwhile, Bill Colby had by no means despaired of Revolutionary Development's potential as a pacification device. He also reposed more confidence than Komer had in the potential of other agencies to staff at least the RD Cadre program, albeit with agency training and field supervision for the non-CIA complement. He would have had to move in this direction, whatever his preference, when Ted Shackley replaced Lapham as chief of station.⁶

Shackley arrived in December 1968 with instructions from DCI Helms to get the station out of "nation-building" and to reemphasize intelligence collection. With this mandate, he saw no reason to take more than perfunctory interest in the motivational side of pacification. His first report on the subject, incoherent even as an exercise in bureaucratic boilerplate, concluded that "by bringing a modicum of physical security to the rural population through self-help, intelligence, civic action, and paramilitary efforts the people can be motivated to oppose the Viet Cong, and in so doing strengthen the basic foundations of the Government of South Vietnam."⁷

If "paramilitary efforts" referred to village self-defense, the proposition became circular, with self-defense used to establish the motivation without which it could not be undertaken in the first place. This apparent incomprehension that motivation had to precede peasant participation in resisting the Viet

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Cong only demonstrated that conceptual leadership for pacification activity would now have to come from outside CIA. In any case, by the time Shackley arrived, Colby had already arranged for military personnel to replace agency officers in the RD program. MACV agreed to supply 28 more officers and 51 more NCOs, bringing the total military complement to 44 officers—one for each province—and 130 NCOs. On 30 December, Colby confirmed to Shackley his belief that the RDC program could prosper without any CIA presence, and they agreed to schedule the withdrawal of CIA managers and province officers.⁸

William Nelson, Colby's successor in FE Division, thought Shackley had moved too fast. Headquarters had not altered its commitment to CIA disengagement from the overt programs, but Nelson wanted the director to have the "opportunity to consider proposed changes in the context of all the Washington equities." He instructed Shackley to tell Colby and the ambassador not to brief General Abrams on the new arrangements before the DCI had approved them when he returned from vacation two days hence.⁹

Helms apparently offered no objection, and by mid-February 1969, Shackley and Colby had set 30 June as the date for total CIA disengagement from the RDC program. The agreement awaited only General Abrams's signature to take effect, after which the GVN would be apprised. Only one thing now worried Colby, the perennial question of funding. He anticipated the same rigidities in Defense Department financial procedures that had helped cripple Operation Switchback. MACV shared this anxiety, and its comptroller petitioned CIA Headquarters for continued agency service as a funding conduit. Prolonged responsibility for Switchback funding had left no desire in CIA to repeat the experience, and headquarters replied with a terse negative. Colby appealed this decision to the agency's deputy director for Support, Robert Bannerman. Invited to consult on the matter, the CIA General Counsel could find no legal obstacle, but alluded to practical difficulties as a reason to stand by the rejection of Colby's request.¹⁰

At this point, the station was already relying exclusively on some 100 contract employees to supply its share of the provincial advisers to the RDC program. Many of these people had received little or no agency training, and, as headquarters admitted, they could not be said to have "any great degree of experience, unique knowledge, or even the basic language skills to engage in counterinsurgency in Vietnam." The agency's contribution, inserted at the management level, derived rather from its "recognition of the essentially political nature of the war" and from its attention to the intelligence implications of this; there was also, as always, CIA's logistic flexibility and a management style

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that put more emphasis on innovative solutions to problems than on application of established doctrine.¹¹

It was true, of course, that a program embodying a fully elaborated conceptual framework and a well-established administrative apparatus would not require CIA's improvisational skills for its effective implementation. Colby's agreement to agency withdrawal from the RDC program reflected his confidence that it had reached a level of maturity that allowed for management along more conventional lines. Colby also believed that, with Thieu's establishment of a Central Pacification Development Council in November 1968, the GVN now had the organizational basis, analogous to CORDS, for a "one war" strategy that coordinated the deployment of military and pacification resources in the struggle for dominance in the countryside.¹²

At this point, Colby endorsed the proposal, so unfavorably reviewed by the station when Komer offered it in mid-1968, to divide every RDC group in two in order to increase the number of communities served. This reflected, presumably, Colby's faith both in President Thieu's commitment to better military support and in recent improvements in Vietnamese organizational arrangements. Colby was probably influenced also by Washington's decision, which preceded Nixon's election and the subsequent contraction of the U.S. commitment in Vietnam, to limit the RDC program to the equivalent of 800 fifty-nine-man groups.¹³

Under the new format, the GVN would deploy a total of 1,600 groups of thirty men each, with one group and a supporting Popular Forces platoon serving not just a hamlet, as in the past, but an entire village. At the same time, pacification losses during the 1968 Tet offensive had persuaded GVN and U.S. pacification managers that durable results required permanent residence in the RDC groups' assigned villages. Thus, the new formula accepted that when cadre deployments were complete, some 1,000 South Vietnamese villages would remain without an RDC presence.¹⁴

Colby had been an early and forceful proponent of the view of the insurgency as a political phenomenon and of the RDC program as an essentially political response to it. Nevertheless, the plan suddenly to double the number of villages with an RDC presence suggests that he shared the U.S. and GVN desire to extend even pro forma GVN control in the countryside in order to improve the allied position in cease-fire negotiations. And in practice, as both the allies and the communists maneuvered to increase their hold on territory and population, GVN and U.S. officials put more emphasis on suppressing the VC via the Phung Hoang program than on motivating the peasantry via Revolutionary Development.

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A New Spirit of Detachment

Until late 1968, the CIA Station in Saigon had served as a kind of intellectual conscience for the American agencies involved in the effort to build rural allegiance to the GVN. Although sometimes naively optimistic about its own programs, it had more often subjected its own results to the same detached scrutiny that it leveled at the pacification activities of other U.S. agencies. But with the decision to withdraw from the RD Cadre program, the station's interest in this aspect of pacification waned to the vanishing point. Station management under Ted Shackley essentially abdicated any independent judgment of pacification progress, adopting the CORDS Hamlet Evaluation System as "the only accepted means of evaluating popular rural loyalties in Vietnam."¹⁵

Contrary to its customary emphasis on political dynamics in the countryside, station management now judged those loyalties by the static HES criterion of control. As of 31 March 1969, 82.1 percent of the rural population was under "effective GVN control," while "only 17.9% was considered loyal to the VC/NVA." This conflation of the terms *control* and *loyalty* begged the question whether a physical GVN presence necessarily replaced political domination by the Viet Cong, and allowed the station to congratulate itself on its "substantial contribution to these increasingly satisfactory security ratings." A valedictory dispatch at the end of April declared the insurgency essentially over. The Vietnamese had learned how to run the pacification programs, and the station agreed with what it said was the Defense Department's belief that the GVN could take them over entirely by mid-1974.¹⁶

Although more inclined than his predecessors to have the station speak with one voice, COS Shackley sometimes allowed a dissenter to be heard. Shortly after his arrival, he had sent headquarters a pessimistic appraisal of pacification progress prepared by his analytic branch. This paper noted the discrepancies between allied reporting and information from communist sources on the antagonists' relative positions in particular rural areas. It implicitly questioned the accuracy of GVN and CORDS assertions of progress, and outgoing CORDS chief Robert Komer was outraged. But the piece drew no headquarters comment at all, and Bob Layton, one of its authors, concluded that it had said nothing that management in Washington wanted to hear.¹⁷

Ironically, just as CIA abandoned its insistence on the political essence of pacification, President Thieu seemed, however hesitantly, to be moving toward accepting it. In late March, Ambassador Bunker recounted to Shackley a meeting at which Thieu recognized the need for a "political revolution." The president acknowledged his failure to build a "structure to rival [that of] the

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communists, but he has had to wait until the situation was right, and people were ready. That time, he thinks, has now arrived.”¹⁸

Thieu’s action formula, however, sounded less revolutionary than the goal. He proposed sending 50,000 cadres to work at village and hamlet level, some from the Information Ministry and others from the technical services. These must be people who would “work and not just talk,” and they would have to present a program that would “interest the masses and inspire them with hope.” Thieu did not specify the content of that program, nor did he define its relationship to the RD cadres or describe how he would protect the new cadre body from communist attack.¹⁹

Thieu stated without elaboration that the new cadres would “have as one of their jobs that of keeping an eye on the communists.” The question remained whether in practice they would supplement Census-Grievance or imitate Ngo Dinh Diem’s use of the Information Ministry in the repressive Anticommunist Denunciation Campaign of the 1950s. The whole idea may in any case have reflected no more than another device to improve the GVN’s position before a cease-fire. Whatever Thieu’s intentions, the station was no longer disposed to regard a discussion with Bunker as an opportunity to push its views on pacification principles and technique. It relayed Bunker’s account to headquarters without comment.²⁰

The Demise of the Census-Grievance Program

Bureaucracy finds nothing more uncongenial than ambiguous objectives, and the dual intelligence and political action purposes of the C-G program had always made it hard to manage. Successive CIA managers, responding to circumstances and their own predilections, alternately emphasized one aspect or the other in practice even as they proclaimed the synergy of a program embodying both. Under Ted Shackley, even this theoretical balance gave way to a nearly exclusive focus on intelligence. In mid-1969, when the station proposed judging C-G value by its intelligence product, headquarters worried that inattention to peasant grievances and recommendations would weaken not only the political but even the intelligence potential of the activity. A query to the station noted that three recent C-G reports had said nothing about the aspiration-grievance aspect, and asked for “succinct comment on the value of this side of the program.”²¹

The station’s reply assured headquarters that C-G objectives still included mobilizing “the general populace of South Vietnam to support the GVN in opposition to the VC and the North Vietnamese.” Accompanying quarterly

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statistics indicated that C-G cadres were still soliciting both suggestions and grievances. Action had been taken on more than 80 percent of some 5,800 suggestions, but the resolution of grievances, at less than 30 percent, left “much to be desired.” The station saw nothing surprising about the figure on grievances, noting that many were “blocked or dismissed by province chiefs who may consider [them] a reflection on themselves or their appointed officials.” With respect to psychological impact, the station opined that an increased volume of C-G suggestions, and action thereon, meant greater confidence in the GVN and that it also accounted for a corresponding increase in intelligence production in the quarter just ended.²²

Headquarters was briefly encouraged. It saw perennially insufficient agency staffing of C-G as having inhibited exploiting the program’s potential, and hoped that redeploying agency officers to C-G from the RDC program would remedy this. And indeed, by early September, headquarters judged the results to be “already impressive. The program can do nothing but continue to improve under Agency management.”²³

This judgment came at the halfway point of a drive to improve C-G intelligence production. On 1 August 1969, Shackley had given his staff sixty days in which to accomplish this. His list of objectives made no mention of the aspiration-grievance aspect, even as a device for building intelligence access, and it appears that, faced with a station staffing reduction mandated by headquarters, he was already disposed to pull out of C-G. While officers in the field tried to generate more reporting and more intelligence-related results such as VC deserters, Shackley was conferring with CORDS chief Colby on what the COS called “preparation for total disengagement from this activity” by mid-1970.²⁴

In early October, Shackley told headquarters he had concluded that Census-Grievance would never produce results commensurate with the agency’s investment of four full-time employees, the part-time services of twenty-five province officers, and a budget of \$7.8 million for fiscal year 1970. He cautioned headquarters that he had not discussed the fate of the program with the GVN, or even with the embassy, and did not rule out its continuation under MACV or GVN auspices. But he clearly anticipated that C-G would be dissolved, for the Vietnamese appeared to regard it as “an American project which they have no interest in retaining if we will not fund and manage it.”²⁵

This prospect made headquarters uneasy. The demise of the program would eliminate a major contributor to Phung Hoang collection at a time when the prospect of a cease-fire threatened reduced intelligence production from another important source, the influx of prisoners of war. And C-G still

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served, at least in some provinces, as a major part of the GVN's rural presence; it had, in the last three months, "obtained action on thousands of people's aspirations and grievances." Someone at headquarters suggested asking the station again to comment on these issues, and on the loss of cover for unilateral rural collection that the withdrawal of C-G case officers would entail. But management apparently had no stomach for a controversy over the program's future. In early October, headquarters authorized its termination effective 30 June 1970. In January of that year, Prime Minister Khiem elected to end the program rather than run it with GVN resources, and agreed to the termination date.²⁶

A Declining CIA Presence in Phung Hoang

Ted Shackley's drive to withdraw CIA from pacification management did not end with the politically oriented programs represented by Revolutionary Development and Census-Grievance. Within weeks of taking over the station in December 1968, he proposed to pull out also from the Phung Hoang and PRU programs in order to make required staffing reductions and redirect station personnel into covert intelligence operations. Headquarters did not object to transferring PRU to the military, but it had major reservations about leaving Phung Hoang, to which it attributed the progress against the VCI achieved during the past year. To cede the agency's advisory function, it believed, would surely result in gradual reversion to military order of battle collection. Experience showed that "efforts to divert the U.S. military from its classic role . . . usually fail after initial enthusiasm has worn away and ingrained routines reassert themselves."²⁷

Headquarters cited other considerations that seemed to argue for continued agency participation in Phung Hoang. A CIA province officer exerted substantially more leverage as Phung Hoang coordinator than in the narrower role of PSB adviser. As a Phung Hoang participant, moreover, he would be better placed to help the police absorb the program if a cease-fire required the Vietnamese military to pull out of it. The program had already identified North Vietnamese intelligence officers in the South, and withdrawal would threaten CIA access to operational leads of this kind.²⁸

Despite the mandate for withdrawal with which he had left Washington, Shackley now found himself being urged to dampen the rate of disengagement from at least that aspect of rural pacification directed against the VCI. His reaction gave headquarters no comfort, for he insisted, with what he said was Colby's backing, that U.S. military personnel could handle the Phung Hoang

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management tasks now assigned to agency officers. He saw no likelihood that MACV would revert to military order of battle collection, for both General Abrams and President Thieu now actively supported the “one war” concept, which made the VCI a vital intelligence target. Seeking to disarm the skeptics at headquarters, Shackley urged headquarters to avoid the “Switchback syndrome,” which he described as a mind-set reluctant to admit that anyone but CIA could do things right.²⁹

Had it wanted to pursue this argument, headquarters might have pointed out the destructive course taken by Operation Switchback and the subsequent decay of the CIDG program. Instead, Bill Nelson simply asked for a fuller explanation of Shackley’s thinking. Nelson thought he must be missing “some vital element” in the station’s rationale for such a “complete reversal of course,” and asked about possible “unstated nuances” regarding bureaucratic politics in Saigon.³⁰

Shackley’s reply relayed Colby’s position that, like Revolutionary Development, Phung Hoang had “matured as an institution” and was now ready for an “unprecedented degree” of subordination to MACV. The program was hitting the VCI at an acceptably high level, and the station could contribute more to the quality of the overall effort with precisely focused penetration operations than it could by continuing to run the Phung Hoang bureaucracy. Shackley went on to argue that the “wind of change” represented by the Paris negotiations demanded adjustments in Saigon; for him, this meant building access to better policy-level intelligence. In any case, although he disagreed that his proposal represented any radical change of course, Shackley now suggested a compromise: leave an agency officer in charge of Phoenix, and allow regional and provincial CIA officers to serve as deputy chiefs, on a part-time basis, of their respective Phung Hoang committees. CORDS would assume full responsibility for funding, logistics, and air support by 30 June 1969.³¹

Headquarters accepted this arrangement in a cable that left unresolved not only the issue of Phung Hoang’s effectiveness, but the question of basic CIA priorities in Vietnam. Walter Roberts, now at headquarters after his tour of duty in Da Nang and Bien Hoa, argued that intelligence was not the problem: “we know the broad plans and capabilities of the Party but still aren’t winning because we aren’t neutralizing the Party.” He agreed with Colby that the Phung Hoang program represented the indispensable means to that end, but disagreed about both its current effectiveness and the chances of exploiting its potential under military management. It was not yet “seriously damaging the Communist Party nervous system,” and it never would if CIA abdicated the influence conferred by its service as Phung Hoang coordinator at all levels

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down to the provincial. In Roberts's view, tactical order of battle intelligence remained of primary interest to the military, which on its own could not be relied on to pursue the "investigative type of operation needed to find and neutralize key [political] cadres."³²

The new staffing formula came into effect without further discussion of these points. It implicitly assumed both that Phung Hoang was already achieving its purposes and that even a reduced CIA presence would suffice to avoid any erosion of the program's commitment to neutralizing the VC apparatus. That presence had always been modest in size: in January 1969, CIA staff officers manned only ten full-time Phung Hoang positions. Colby released three of these in mid-February; the other seven were to remain with CORDS only until 30 June. At that point, military personnel would fill all the program's 450 full-time positions except that of the chief.³³

The effect of these staffing changes cannot be quantified, but Phung Hoang results in the first half of 1969 did not meet the expectations of CIA analysts. Although the Accelerated Pacification Campaign continued through January, its momentum faded as the approach of the Tet holidays and predictions of another VC assault drove the GVN back onto the defensive. The still-uncertain outcome of the negotiations in Paris also contributed, as a CORDS analysis put it, to "inhibiting enthusiasm for Phung Hoang operations." The GVN gave the impression of considering Phung Hoang "politically inexpedient," and a new American-sponsored emphasis on senior Viet Cong cadres had resulted in fewer neutralizations without the desired rise in quality. The program's accomplishments, furthermore, were being vitiated by the GVN practice of releasing at least 90 percent of captured infrastructure members within six months of their arrest or capture.³⁴

All of this notwithstanding, the CORDS appraisal noted the claimed attrition of more than 10 percent of the VCI during the same six-month period, with a total of more than 8,500 cadres captured or killed. By the end of 1969, according to CORDS figures, the total for the year reached 19,500, almost 4,000 more than in 1968, despite the adoption of identifying criteria that excluded mere "supporters" of the VC. And 60 percent of the 1969 "neutralizations" represented "priority targets," that is, cadres of some importance in the apparatus. This left some 74,000 cadres in a VC organization still intact at province level and higher, but quality appeared to be declining as the communists struggled to replace their losses.³⁵

Whether the CIA analysts who expected more had reason to be disappointed could be disputed. Whatever the other contributions of Phung Hoang—these included intelligence provided to combat commands engaged in clearing

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or sweep operations—its operations over the course of 1969 materially weakened the VCI. A captured political organizer insisted that COSVN Resolution 9, issued in midyear, was a counsel of despair, an “attempt to save an otherwise hopeless political and military situation.” Other reporting suggested that VC coercion was replacing persuasion as a means of extracting support from an increasingly skeptical and hostile peasantry. There was “outright kidnapping of adolescent children,” and VC tax collectors were resorting to “armed robbery to fill their coffers.” These considerations encouraged U.S. Phoenix management to believe that the communists’ ability “to govern at the village/hamlet level diminished during 1969.”³⁶

There is no doubt that, at least where GVN officials adopted the Phung Hoang organization as their own, the VCI suffered grievous losses. The so-called rifle shot approach, originally advocated by Robert Komer to go after selected Viet Cong, produced sixty-four “neutralizations” in two districts of Quang Ngai Province at the end of 1969. Thirteen of these cadres had worked at district and three at province level. A newsletter sent to Phung Hoang advisers attributed all this to the “enthusiasm of the Vietnamese.”³⁷

Similar anecdotal evidence came from Vinh Long Province, where many more people were volunteering information on the VC as territorial security improved. The district Phung Hoang committees in Vinh Long had published “most-wanted” lists, and more than a third of the communists neutralized over a four-week period in late 1969 were working at city, district, or province level.³⁸

Nevertheless, the very substantial results obtained by the Accelerated Pacification Campaign and subsequent Phung Hoang operations did not persuade agency or CORDS officials that the program was fulfilling its potential. The same newsletter that praised the Vinh Long effort also offered a dreary litany of apathetic GVN performance in other provinces. In Phu Yen, at the end of 1969, Phung Hoang had not contributed to any recent neutralizations. All cases of communist cadres captured or killed there represented the adventitious product of military operations. GVN officials in Phu Yen wanted to try the “most-wanted” posters being used in the Delta, but they were indifferent about accelerating the disposition of Viet Cong detainees and ensuring that high-level cadres were sent to secure incarceration on Con Son Island. And interrogations for intelligence purposes remained inadequate, “due to lack of interest.” The Vietnamese in Phu Yen seemed simply not to believe that the Phung Hoang approach would work, and the newsletter lamenting the situation there described most other provinces in similar terms.³⁹

The Hau Nghia microcosm offered a similar outlook. Attrition there had

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indeed decimated VC guerrilla and local forces, and main force units and North Vietnamese Army elements were now protecting the tax collectors and proselytizers. But these cadres were still hard at work, and VC rice collection was continuing even in daylight hours. Local Communist Party organizations seemed to be “policing their ranks and learning how to survive in the pacification environment.” The provincial Phung Hoang Committee, meanwhile, was doing almost nothing. Only one of thirty-five VC cadres seized in September fell to a Phung Hoang operation, and at the end of 1969 the provincial committee had not targeted “a single individual [VC cadre] and was doing nothing with the information assembled.”⁴⁰

A CORDS appraisal reaffirmed that only more vigorous targeting of senior VCI cadres would have a decisive effect, for if this level were left intact, “it is axiomatic that [it] will rebuild the organization at the village/hamlet level.” But a more energetic, disciplined effort would require the “whole-hearted backing” of province and district chiefs, some of whom delegated their Phung Hoang authority in such diffuse fashion that individual accountability became hard to trace. “This is traditionally a Vietnamese *modus operandi* and wherever direct supervision is lacking the trend [away from accountability] will continue.”⁴¹

Perceptions varied by observer, and while American advisers deplored GVN lethargy in the campaign against the VCI, President Thieu saw major progress, especially in the Mekong Delta. He told a visiting George Carver in late 1969 that the militia, now called the People’s Self-Defense Forces (PSDF), numbered 2 million people armed with half a million weapons. Thieu boasted of otherwise unspecified “political consequences” that supplemented the PSDF contribution to physical security, and asserted that not one militiaman had defected. Carver found this claim “hard to accept as literally accurate,” but did not question the general picture of a countryside uniting against the Viet Cong. Indeed, the enormous preponderance of allied firepower—there were still 475,000 U.S. troops in South Vietnam—must in fact have persuaded many villagers that their future lay with the GVN.⁴²

A Question of Competence

The theme of Vietnamese indifference, with its corollaries in corruption and incompetence, pervades CORDS and station correspondence on the pacification programs. But both CORDS and CIA management were painfully conscious that the shortcomings of the advisory corps had something to do with perpetually disappointing results. Part of this was simply quantitative. The

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shortage of case officers appears as a chronic complaint in station reporting, which described how Census-Grievance and intelligence operations with the Police Special Branch, in particular, failed to get the attention required to exploit their potential. Contract employees supplemented and often substituted for CIA staff officers, but for the most part they were not intelligence professionals, and the introductory training that preceded their Vietnam assignments did not compensate for their inexperience.

As early as February 1969, with headquarters about to mandate a reduction to 650 people, the station was lamenting the insufficiency of the approximately 1,000 employees then in Vietnam. One problem was a “disproportionate mix of contract officers with staff employees in province operations.” Ted Shackley worried more about the effectiveness of the contractors than about their numbers: “It has long been the Station’s goal to [improve] operations in the provinces and to introduce competence where it is now substantially lacking.” The redirection of station efforts away from cadre operations to conventional intelligence operations only aggravated the problem. Far from allowing an overall manpower reduction, it seemed to Shackley to call for an even larger and more expert staff devoted to collection.⁴³

The ethos of the Directorate of Operations had always encouraged a belief that case officers were not so much made as born. Motivation, in this view, was the prime qualification, and some managers thought only a modicum of training was required for successful practice. This mind-set contributed to management’s readiness to employ nonagency people in Vietnam. It was encouraged, moreover, by the fact that the RD Cadre and PRU programs required a fairly eclectic set of advisory skills, some of them as unfamiliar to most CIA officers as to any of the contractors. Ralph Johnson, associated with Vietnam operations since 1961, evaluated the police advisers after a visit to the provinces in mid-1969. He deplored their poor writing ability, but judged that officers transferred from RD Cadre and PRU duty had otherwise adapted very well. The agency’s senior man in IV Corps, equally optimistic, had earlier submitted a plan for the supplemental training of reassigned advisers. The syllabus, a surviving copy of which looks more like the basis for at least a year’s instruction in the collection and processing of intelligence, was to be covered in four weeks.⁴⁴

Station management in Saigon expressed a less sanguine view. The level of training and experience of its provincial officers, nearly all of them contractors, was “decidedly inferior. A handful have performed with distinction but, by our standards, few have acquired professional competence much before the end of their tours.” Describing this state of affairs for headquarters, the station noted

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that in Saigon, “the most vital piece of South Vietnam,” all but two Special Branch advisers were CIA staffers. And their police counterparts were more competent—“(we stress ‘relatively’)”—than PSB contacts in the provinces. A headquarters officer wondered how the station thought it could improve matters by having inexperienced provincial advisers train inferior counterparts in such matters as debriefing technique. “Why in heaven don’t they farm out some of the talent [devoted to Saigon] to raise the standard of provincial operations?” But it seems in retrospect that there were simply not enough competent people on either side to do both.⁴⁵

At least one manager thought that, on the advisory side, a shortage of competence was aggravated by the absence even of a good-faith effort. Colonel William Greenwalt, assistant to Evan Parker on the Phoenix staff, sent a blistering complaint to the program’s military personnel. He began by acknowledging the irreducible disadvantages imposed by the language barrier and the frequent absence of experience in intelligence or any kind of advisory work. But Greenwalt found it “intolerable” that any Phung Hoang adviser would be ignorant of policy and operational guidance from the Phoenix staff, or that he would fail to know the local GVN participants in Phung Hoang, or the state of the program’s files. Some advisers, Greenwalt said, had made no effort to ensure liaison with tactical forces in their areas, or even to become acquainted with other advisers—PRU, RD cadres, Police Field Force, etc.—also supporting Phung Hoang.⁴⁶

Colonel Greenwalt specified that his complaints were directed at the exception, not the rule, but in any case, there existed no pool of better potential candidates for advisory jobs, for the Phoenix staff any more than for CIA. As of early 1969, the station could only hope that more quantity would offset scarcity of quality. At that time, it began experimenting with a six-man provincial team, including a full-time adviser with the police-run Provincial Interrogation Center.⁴⁷

The Police Special Branch would have presented formidable challenges even to fully qualified advisers bent on converting it to the techniques and standards of expert American practice. Ever since the days of Ngo Dinh Diem, CIA had recognized PSB inadequacies while proclaiming their imminent amelioration under agency guidance. This characteristic mix of tough-minded objectivity and brash self-confidence shaped an estimate of the PSB done after Tet 1968. The station noted that only one-third of PSB’s 12,000 people “have had some training.” But that was only the beginning, for the real problems were “not so much operational as human.” The faction-ridden service was staffed by a “hodge-podge of men from Ngo Dinh Nhu’s secret police, ex-CIO, MSS

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[Military Security Service], and [the] old Cong An,” that is, the Sûreté. Management was “steeped in outmoded mandarin and French traditions,” and promotion open only to career officers. “Socially, the PSB man is almost the lowest form of political life—the pay alone is . . . insufficient for anything better than subsistence.”⁴⁸

PSB morale, predictably enough, was “frequently very low.” The station judged that “accommodation to the enemy occurs here and there, [and] brutality is common.” The service probably was penetrated not only by the VC but by the French and perhaps both the communists and Nationalist Chinese. In some provinces, the service was “almost totally ineffective.” And “graft, of course, is a way of life.” Nevertheless, “many very good PSB chiefs are doing very good jobs and . . . PSB’s overall performance during the Tet offensive surprised most knowledgeable observers.” This allowed the conclusion that “with improved training, better pay, more confidence, recognition, and above all, better leadership, there is no reason that PSB should not be able to do a competent job throughout the country.”⁴⁹

These conditions for qualitative improvement were at best not to be fulfilled overnight—it was not until March 1969 that the GVN allowed the Special Branch to conduct its own training and to control its field elements down to district level. Meanwhile, the station had to deal with things as they were. Heading the list of problems, from late 1968 to mid-1969, were the Provincial Interrogation Centers. Sponsored and supported by the station as an instrument for collection on the VC infrastructure, the PIC had always suffered from the primacy of military authority over prisoners and defectors, and from the PSB’s inferior protocol status and low professional reputation.⁵⁰

The weaknesses of both the service and its advisers emerged in a CIA survey done in late 1968. Of twenty-five PICs inspected, two qualified as excellent, with four “fair to good,” and the remaining nineteen “decidedly poor.” Most of them lacked qualified interrogators and enough clerical personnel, and the performance of the available staff was often “lackadaisical.” PIC staffs ignored procedure and instructions from Saigon, and in their ignorance of the VCI often overlooked leads. Many advisers were equally culpable, having neglected their duty to advise and support. Indeed, some failed even to “appreciate [the] potential value of [the] interrogation product. Some sick PICs have exhibited all the above faults at once.” The best the station could offer, by way of a short-term remedy, was better management and support by regional supervisors, each of whom was to receive a specially trained mobile interrogation team to handle unusually promising cases.⁵¹

The military—whether only ARVN or also allied forces is not clear from

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station reporting—continued to indulge its proclivity to hold prisoners long after completing the tactical debriefings that properly enjoyed first priority. In the spring of 1969, an order from General Cao Van Vien, chief of the JGS, directed that prisoners be sent immediately to the PIC after their exploitation for tactical intelligence, and the station hoped for more expeditious handling. Meanwhile, an insufficient number of trained interrogators and “neglect by preoccupied PSB and CIA province officers” reduced the intelligence value of the 27,500 cases that had passed through the PICs in the previous twelve months.⁵²

Ill-trained interrogators were the most likely to engage in the practice—then regarded by CIA as not only inhumane but also counterproductive—of physically abusing their interrogation subjects. Peer De Silva, still the DCI’s Vietnam adviser, noted in mid-1969 that “traditional Oriental interrogation brutality, aggravated by guerrilla war vengeance, continues to a significant extent.” But the agency had only modest leverage with the Vietnamese, for the PICs existed only as the result of American initiative. The GVN had never adopted them as an essential instrument of its war effort, and suspending or reducing support would have done little to promote reform. In this situation, De Silva said, “CIA doggedly teaches abstention from physical brutality.”⁵³

Although station officers seem in fact to have made good-faith efforts to prevent the abuse of prisoners, and to have taken some pride in keeping instances of it to a minimum, the publicity attending known or alleged exceptions created a different public perception. Marjorie Nelson, an American physician captured at Tet, testified at a congressional hearing that she had seen prisoners being beaten at the Quang Ngai PIC in April and August 1969. The station confirmed the April incident, telling headquarters that Dr. Nelson had reported it at the time to the province senior adviser. The CIA man in Quang Ngai had then approached the local PSB chief, whose defensiveness seemed to imply culpable knowledge, but the case officer had no means of coercing him into corrective action.⁵⁴

The station reported another incident of prisoner abuse in Quang Ngai, apparently earlier than the August beating alleged by Dr. Nelson. Both the province senior adviser and a station officer witnessed this second incident. They protested to the province chief, but he refused to treat the matter as anything requiring investigation or action.⁵⁵

The limits of American leverage in such cases were not always apparent, especially to observers hostile to the entire enterprise in Vietnam, and as noted earlier some of the programs in which abuses occurred were not of vital concern to the GVN. So long as U.S. authorities regarded such a program as

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indispensable to the prosecution of the war, these abuses—and the unwelcome media attention they provoked—would persist. Indeed, the public relations problem could only grow as domestic U.S. opposition to the war intensified.

New Management for Provincial Reconnaissance

The GVN attached more importance to the CIA-run PRUs than to the police-run interrogation centers, and agency leverage was correspondingly greater. Nevertheless, 1969 brought a requirement for new management arrangements that would accommodate both the GVN and the demands of Vietnamization while preserving the PRU capability into a cease-fire period. When JGS chairman General Cao Van Vien officially endorsed the PRU program in mid-1967, he had left intact its de facto CIA control, exercised at the province level. Now, a year and a half later, the contribution of that arrangement to flexible, efficient management had come to be outweighed by working-level GVN impatience with the preponderant CIA role and by growing criticism in the Saigon press and the National Assembly.⁵⁶

The prospect of what came to be called Vietnamization had also become a problem. The station reported that MACV was under orders to put its programs under local control “as fast as the GVN can hoist them on board.” This affected the PRU program, for CORDS chief Bill Colby was unwilling to continue letting CIA officers manage the PRUs. Colby also worried about flap potential, and the station appeared to share his perception that the risk of embarrassment to the agency from real or alleged PRU misconduct would decline only when agency officers gave up their command role for a genuinely advisory function.⁵⁷

The proposed solution called for giving PRU formal status as a GVN program located in the Interior Ministry. Lodging the program there would, it was hoped, insulate it from the restrictions on military operations expected to follow a cease-fire. The Ministry’s National Police Directorate lacked the capacity to run the program, and ARVN personnel would gradually and temporarily replace CIA advisers while the police built their own management capability. Interior Minister Khiem agreed in mid-December 1968 to find 54 ARVN officers and 108 NCOs, all to be chosen for their combat record and knowledge of the VC infrastructure.⁵⁸

The station’s plans for this ARVN contingent reflected its concern, explicitly shared by headquarters, about program effectiveness under Vietnamese management. All 162 men would get CIA-sponsored training, after which they would work under the control of agency officers until the “intangible date”—

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the station guessed it might come in mid-1970—at which they had demonstrated enough expertise to be given command. The station assumed that U.S. funding would continue through this transition period.⁵⁹

On 31 March 1969, Prime Minister Tran Van Huong signed a station-drafted decree integrating the PRU program into the National Police. At this point, the Vietnamese had come to terms with the embarrassing discovery that almost 1,100 of its cadres had chosen this more hazardous duty after deserting from ARVN. The Joint General Staff, faced with the alternatives of leaving these men in a productive program or jailing them, decided to grant them “clemency.”⁶⁰

The adverse judgment on ARVN leadership implicit in this migration became explicit in a headquarters document that reflected second thoughts about the wisdom of a speedy transfer to full GVN control. The PRU, it was thought, showed the GVN that “Vietnamese personnel, properly trained and commanded, can do the job.” But even good PRUs could be frustrated when GVN officials, instead of supporting and rewarding their efforts, intervened on behalf of suspected Viet Cong. The better the PRU, the more likely it was to identify even covert VC cadres living under GVN administration. These cadres sometimes enjoyed the protection of friends or relatives in the GVN or in the media. In Vinh Binh and several other provinces, PRU performance slowed drastically in mid-1969 when the press and members of the National Assembly accused it of targeting innocent people—most if not all of whom the station considered to be active VC.⁶¹

In addition, one key working-level relationship with the GVN now turned confrontational. The GVN’s nominal head of PRU training at Vung Tau, Major Nguyen Van Lang, had successfully lobbied in mid-1969 for the removal of his agency counterpart. Headquarters implicitly defended the adviser when it interpreted the incident as a sign of “too hasty [a] turnover to [the] wrong people.” Whether or not Lang had material cause for his antagonism—the record does not describe the circumstances—the incident contributed to a retreat from headquarters’ earlier estimate of a mid-1970 transfer to GVN management. In late July, it foresaw continued U.S. funding and agency control for another two years, with transfer even then contingent on “many other favorable developments in the war.”⁶²

The Morality and Politics of PRU

As had been the case since the creation of the predecessor Counter-Terror program, agency officials planning the PRU’s future worried about the associated

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problems of ethics and public relations even while they defended the program as necessary, effective, and basically respectful of the laws of warfare. Peer De Silva, on whose watch as chief of station the Counter-Terror program began, noted in mid-1969 that doctrinal emphasis on captures was now producing five of these for every two VC killed in PRU operations. He argued that “in a situation which combines guerrilla war, regular war, and hazardous intelligence reconnaissance missions at night into Viet Cong territory, the PRUs are not ideal instruments for dispensing Anglo-Saxon justice, but CIA and its officers in the field are doing all they can to adhere to the accepted principles of land warfare.”⁶³

One way to maintain the desired discipline was to send American advisers—usually military personnel—out on operations, and this had become common well before 1969. But an advisory presence only intensified media attention if an atrocity was discovered or alleged to have taken place. To eliminate the risk of this kind of embarrassment, the station instructed PRU advisers in late September 1969 to stay at launch site command posts or U.S. fire support bases, or in the command aircraft during helicopter insertions of PRU teams.⁶⁴

Preparing argumentation for agency responses to congressional or press inquiries, George Carver emphasized the efficiency of the PRU operation. Comprising less than one-half of 1 percent of allied forces supporting Phung Hoang, PRUs had accounted for 207, or 14 percent, of the VC cadres captured or killed in August 1969. According to Carver, PRU elements were responsible for the capture of more than 12,000 VC cadres and guerrillas and more than 6,000 killed in the year ending in June 1969. The program had cost the Viet Cong 76 men for every PRU cadre lost.⁶⁵

Had efficiency been the operative question, the Carver memorandum might well have helped turn back the wave of censure that rolled over the PRU program in late 1969. Indeed, so long as U.S. officials responsible for it remained unanimous in their support, neither media allegations nor the public criticism that these fed would necessarily have affected American participation in the program. But that consensus disappeared after a briefing on Phung Hoang for Secretary of the Army Stanley Resor when he toured South Vietnam in October 1969.

What Resor heard made him worry not just about PRU but about Phung Hoang as a whole. Phung Hoang was reaching only low-level VC, he later told Defense Secretary Laird, while program goals were arbitrary and GVN participation only halfhearted. Resor deplored what he saw as an indiscriminate “dragnet method” of attacking the VCI. Apparently not briefed on the Sep-

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tember proscription of adviser participation, he also objected to U.S. military personnel accompanying PRU operations.⁶⁶

Finally, Resor complained that he had not learned the details of PRU's "operational methods." Thus persuaded that his briefers had withheld information, he fell back on press commentary for a judgment of the program, telling Laird that it had "recently been characterized in the press as a program of 'political assassination.'"⁶⁷

In the context of the overall campaign against the VC infrastructure, Resor expressed anxiety that measures to increase Phung Hoang efficiency might ignore the "social and moral costs which that might entail." This apprehension did not prevent him from recommending "a more selective attack on the leadership" whose only purpose could have been precisely that of greater efficiency. But he apparently did not see U.S. participation in PRU raids as one means of achieving this.⁶⁸

The inconsistency of Resor's conclusions may have owed something to the quality of the CIA briefings, for which Ted Shackley apologized to headquarters. The COS attributed the secretary's misapprehensions to station briefing officers who had "under-played strengths and over-emphasized weaknesses" in their zeal to provide the full story, warts and all. He exonerated Resor of "selective listening," blaming instead the "packaging" created by his briefers. Shackley rebutted Secretary Resor on only one point, when he asserted that Phung Hoang was getting "first class" support from President Thieu and Prime Minister Tran Thien Khiem.⁶⁹

Secretary Laird pursued Resor's complaints, asking George Carver for comments on the army secretary's trip report. Carver pointed out the distortions and simplifications in Resor's understanding of Phung Hoang, and by implication of PRU. But the anxiety over PRU was also rooted in the program's shaky status under South Vietnamese law. This indeterminate status offered no legal protection to either the cadres or their advisers.⁷⁰

A December 1968 incident in which four PRU cadres and a U.S. Navy Seal tried to seize a VCI suspect in Kien Tuong Province illustrated the problem. The suspect was killed trying to escape, a familiar enough outcome but one complicated in this case when, eight months later, his widow pressed charges against the team. Whatever the inspiration—the station mentioned as possibilities her greed, a VC-inspired political ploy, or even anti-American bias on the part of the province chief—the civil court recognized neither PRU's existence nor the December operation as an official act of the GVN. The PRU cadres risked a sentence of eight years, and the prosecutor was vigorously pressing for the identity of the American involved.⁷¹

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At the same time, the political climate in the United States had become increasingly intolerant of harsh methods of pacification, and the more discriminating the methods, the more hostile the reaction. In the United States, public opinion increasingly tended to equate targeted operations against an identified enemy with atrocious violation of the laws of war. Although unrelated to Phung Hoang or PRU, two notorious incidents had at this point complicated the evaluation of these activities. The notorious massacre of Vietnamese civilians by U.S. troops at My Lai, which surfaced in March 1969, and the so-called Green Beret case, involving the murder of a suspected double agent by his U.S. Army Special Forces handlers, darkened the tone of the public debate and clouded the prospects for any official program of selective violence.⁷²

The Green Beret case in particular, in which the defense alleged that a CIA officer had endorsed killing the agent, persuaded MACV commander General Abrams that any association with the agency by military personnel threatened his ability to apply the Uniform Code of Military Justice. On 12 November 1969, he told Ted Shackley that he was disposed to reject a staff recommendation to keep sixty MACV advisers with PRU until mid-1971, and instead to pull out completely in the near future. Shackley reported Abrams's assurances of admiration for the program and the general's stated belief that sixty people in PRU would be far more productive there than in conventional assignments. But the political costs were prohibitive, Abrams thought, and Shackley believed him to be under great pressure as the result of two recent incidents in which American soldiers were filmed standing by while ARVN troops beat and in one case killed prisoners.⁷³

DCI Helms thought it prudent, at this point, to put on the record the views of the interagency covert action oversight group, the 303 Committee. He wanted it either to reaffirm the value of the PRU program or to tell CIA to close it down. In Saigon, hoping to keep the program going, COS Shackley solicited the support of Ellsworth Bunker. The ambassador vigorously endorsed the program, and said he found reasonable and acceptable the political risks inherent in CIA direction of military personnel. Shackley reported that Bunker "indicated [that he was] willing to assume responsibilities for these risks." Bunker's endorsement did not soften General Abrams's position: at a meeting with Bunker on 2 December, the general inexplicably invoked the My Lai massacre to support his argument against military participation in any program not under unambiguous military control.⁷⁴

Abrams's case had a stronger political basis than My Lai, however, and Bunker acceded to it. Shackley reacted to this fait accompli with a proposal to add ten CIA advisers to the six still on duty with the program. No other new

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support would be required, for Shackley's original intention to withdraw from PRU had in any case already faded as he came to reflect headquarters' pessimism about its viability if deprived of CIA support and management.⁷⁵

Conditional Vietnamization of PRU

In August, well before the contretemps with Secretary Resor, Shackley had begun negotiating the transfer of the station's PRU logistic and administrative responsibilities to USOM's police advisory element, the Public Safety Division. The idea at that point was to continue CIA funding until mid-1970, at which point the program would be absorbed intact into the National Police Field Force. But the GVN's selection of Vietnamization priorities favored the military over the police, and it became clear that no significant GVN resources would be devoted to PRU. By mid-September Shackley saw no alternative to continued CIA support if the program was to survive.⁷⁶

CORDS chief Bill Colby tried a different tack. Having already raised the matter with the Vietnamese, he told Shackley in mid-November that he proposed to integrate some 1,400 PRU cadres into the National Police and then to dissolve the program. Shackley, who regarded Phung Hoang as the "priority GVN pacification effort" and PRU as a major weapon against the VCI, vetoed this on the spot. He insisted that PRU must continue as an autonomous program "so long as there was to be an intensive and targeted attack against the VCI." He quickly marshaled GVN support for this view with appeals to National Police chief Colonel Tran Van Hai and Thieu's security assistant, Dang Van Quang. Colby backed off, and Shackley told headquarters that the program could continue if CIA supplied the \$6.7 million budget for fiscal year 1971.⁷⁷

Shackley vigorously pushed for both the money and the staffing authority—the ten advisers would be reassigned from within the station—at a time when in his judgment the VCI was "unraveling and [losing] both its appeal and effectiveness." But the COS anticipated serious damage to PRU effectiveness by withdrawal of MACV advisers. Accordingly, he discussed with headquarters using the 303 Committee's review of PRU, requested by DCI Helms, to lobby for a continued military advisory contingent.⁷⁸

The tricky aspect of such a ploy lay in the risk that General Abrams and Ambassador Bunker would see it as an end run by CIA to circumvent the local decision to withdraw the MACV advisers. A fortuitous visit to Vietnam by Deputy Defense Secretary David Packard in November gave Shackley the opportunity to get the matter to the policy level in the course of routine brief-

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ings, and headquarters then placed the issue on the 303 Committee agenda. The committee accepted the CIA argument against withdrawing U.S. participation in a productive activity against the VCI at a time when the political aspect of the struggle had returned to prominence. The committee acted in early January, authorizing funding until mid-1971 in order to “consummate . . . orderly Vietnamization” and keeping open the possibility of a continued MACV advisory presence. The size of that presence, if Defense endorsed it, would gradually decline from 108 in late 1969 to 30 by July 1971. At this point, General Abrams was proposing to let attrition settle the question: incumbent advisers would simply not be replaced.⁷⁹

During the debate over the future of the PRU program, operational and intelligence results declined. Between June and December 1969, captures of suspected Viet Cong dropped by half, and so did the number of disseminated intelligence reports. Bill Nelson wondered whether this decline suggested the wisdom of withdrawing entirely, even before mid-1971. Shackley reminded him that the station had predicted a decline in PRU momentum as American advice replaced direct combat leadership, and that “this reality” would not be a “harbinger of doom.”⁸⁰

The station acknowledged PRU’s problems, the first of which was that “native leadership has not developed as rapidly as we had hoped.” In addition, the countryside was “no longer [the] exclusive operational preserve” of PRU teams. The combination of more aggressive operations by other GVN forces and the correspondingly defensive stance of the VCI limited the number and accessibility of targets for PRU attack. Shackley went on to describe the net result as a larger effort for fewer results, and interpreted this as a sign of impending victory. The VC infrastructure, “although still [a] formidable opponent is on [a] downhill slide toward oblivion.” The COS judged the PRU program as still playing a vital role, and the present a bad time to abandon it. On the contrary, for the next year and a half it would need American help with better targeting and more sophisticated operations.⁸¹

Headquarters thought it might be PRU that was headed for oblivion, as preparations for its absorption into the National Police revealed how little the GVN was inclined to invest its own resources in the program. It appears that General Khiem’s late-1968 promise of 162 officers and NCOs had come to nothing, for eight months later the station found itself again trying to move the GVN bureaucracy. This resulted in an Interior Ministry request to the Defense Ministry for some 200 officers and NCOs experienced in intelligence and small-unit operations. But nothing happened until February 1970, when Defense offered the police their pick of 600 officers and NCOs eligible for

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release from ARVN Rehabilitation Centers, that is, “GVN jails.” Volunteers from this contingent of “military ex-criminals” were available to be assigned as PRU commanders. What the station called the “political implications” of accepting such an offer rendered it unacceptable; meanwhile, untainted ARVN personnel remained unavailable.⁸²

Infighting in the National Police and tension between the station and USOM’s Public Safety Division presented even more basic threats to the program’s integrity. PRU chief Major Lang, less than a year earlier regarded by the station as an antagonist, suddenly became indispensable when an unnamed senior police official, perhaps “spurred on by his PSD advisers,” inveigled police chief and now Brigadier General Hai into removing Lang. The candidate to replace him was a crony of one Major Hiep, chief of PRU training at Vung Tau, a man whose financial corruption and general dereliction of duty were then making a shambles of the training program.⁸³

Ted Shackley took up the challenge on 1 March in a “‘bloody’ two hour and 40 minute session” with General Hai. The COS demanded that Hai rescind the Lang transfer and threatened that without this and action on other PRU management failures within the next thirty days, he would withdraw CIA support. Hai professed a desire to comply, but claimed to lack the protocol status needed to make representations at the required levels. In order to get Lang returned to PRU duty, the station had to appeal to both the chairman of the Joint General Staff and the prime minister. The station concluded its report of this exercise with a statement of highly qualified optimism: “Vigilance and a willingness to apply Station leverage should and can prevent disintegration of PRU for the foreseeable future.”⁸⁴

What CIA leverage could not achieve was a level of PRU effectiveness consistent with the activity’s perceived potential. In May 1970, the station’s litany of PRU weaknesses essentially repeated the complaints of CIA managers since 1965. Some unit commanders were weak or corrupt, or both, and too many province and district chiefs misused their teams, usually by combining them for conventional military operations. It seemed to the station that some province chiefs failed to understand even the point of anti-VCI operations. Corrective measures included the perennial weeding out of incompetent leadership, but the station resisted any temptation to guarantee results. Some units might indeed be unsalvageable, and it proposed simply to dissolve any that continued to fall short of minimum performance standards.⁸⁵

A purge of undesirables and ineffectives did in fact follow, and by August 1970 the PRU program employed about 3,400 men, or 1,000 less than a year earlier. In October, the CIA advisory complement to the PRUs had diminished

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to seventeen staff and contract advisers, with eight in Saigon and nine divided among the station's regional offices.⁸⁶

To shrink the PRU ranks took some doing, especially in places like Quang Ngai, where the PRU commander, Nguyen Huu Khoa, defied his province chief over the required reduction in force. After being summoned to Saigon to see Prime Minister Khiem and DGNP Colonel Hai, the province chief returned to Quang Ngai with new orders, but Khoa evaded these as well. The exercise was repeated under a new province chief, and it was only after more station representations to the prime minister that Khoa was arrested in early April 1970. DGNP Hai had been of no help in this, and when Shackley reproached him at a "heated meeting" in March, Hai complained that he felt "emasculated when dealing with a province chief." The standard tactic, Hai claimed, involved a province chief's claim that his authority derived directly, depending on circumstances, from the Interior minister, the prime minister, or the president himself. In all this hierarchical confusion, Hai said, he was helpless.⁸⁷

Vietnamization and Phung Hoang

By early 1970, all parties, including the communists, agreed that the rural insurgent apparatus had suffered grievous damage in the past two years. Nevertheless, many working-level American advisers had at this point come to doubt the continuing value of Phung Hoang as a weapon against the infrastructure. This doubt stemmed in part from the political climate, for the hostile tone of hearings by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee had made both American and Vietnamese participants reluctant to be "associated with [a] loser," as the station put it. But there was also the problem of declining results. With the transfer of Phoenix management to MACV in mid-1969, the station saw renewed emphasis on military order of battle information as gradually weakening the effort against the VCI.⁸⁸

Both these factors presumably contributed to the "high degree of pessimism about [the] future" of Phung Hoang expressed by PRU advisers at a conference at Vung Tau in February 1970. Station management adopted Bill Colby's indomitable optimism when it asserted that the acknowledged "practical problems" were "not insurmountable." The solution was a "more positive attitude," and the station was "working on this."⁸⁹

The station was also working on the endemic problems on the Vietnamese side of Phung Hoang administration. CIA had always supplied an agency officer to run the Phoenix staff, and in early 1970 remained deeply involved in the program's management. In the spring of 1970, Ted Shackley received a request

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from Prime Minister Khiem—the COS may have solicited it—to recommend ways of dealing with the bureaucratically orphaned military and police officers detailed to Phung Hoang from their respective services. After clearing its idea with the mission, the station suggested converting the Phung Hoang staff into a new directorate of the National Police, a move that would dissolve the existing interagency structure and provide for a regularized institutional status and better logistic support.⁹⁰

Sensible enough in purely formal terms, the choice of the police as a home for the Phung Hoang organization mortgaged the future of the anti-VCI campaign to the prospects of raising police competence to a level that drew professional respect and heightened institutional status. What degree of competence might be adequate depended in large part, of course, on the staying power of the communist rural apparatus. Shackley's recommendation explicitly rested on the perception that current efforts were gradually reducing the VC organization to the point at which Phung Hoang could be abolished and the residual effort turned over to the Police Special Branch.⁹¹

The judgment that the VCI had been forced onto a “downhill slide toward oblivion” rested on the assumption that the communists would be unable to recruit enough replacements of comparable ability for their cadre losses. For the COS, the current reduced level of Phung Hoang production reflected simply the “greatly reduced VCI base.” MACV was then estimating VCI strength at 74,000, a number not much smaller than a year earlier, but the communists' ability to mobilize the peasants was judged to have shrunk as provincial and district leadership was forced to operate from border sanctuaries and base areas.⁹²

The question remained whether the balance of political forces in the countryside was in fact inclining toward the GVN. A draft headquarters cable of mid-March 1970 worried about the “upward trend in terror and guerrilla activity” and concluded that the “ability of the VCI to reassert themselves at this time makes Vietnamization look very bad.” This problem of interpretation arose from the fact that even as the VCI shrank, it remained, in the words of a MACV summary, “essentially intact.”⁹³

In Hau Nghia, for example, although Phung Hoang itself had accomplished little, military operations had broken communist armed resistance and ARVN forces could run squad-level operations. In the nine months ending in April 1970, the damage to the communists could be measured not solely in terms of the always-suspect body count, but also by the amount of captured weaponry, which included 2,000 small arms and 150 crew-served weapons. But a frustrated unit commander in the U.S. Twenty-fifth Division complained

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about the way the “VC stream out of the hedgerows and go into the hamlets,” immune from attack under the rules of engagement promulgated for U.S. forces under Vietnamization. Despite the acknowledged VC losses, “a small number of cadres, supported by a remnant of guerrilla forces, was adequate to project a Front presence.”⁹⁴

A few months later, the new ROIC for III Corps, Donald Gregg, proposed an introductory tour of the portion of Hau Nghia now declared secure. His staff would not hear of it, arguing that the facts were not true to the MACV security rating. Gregg thereupon commissioned an assessment of the balance of forces in allegedly pacified Trang Bang District. Based on information from defectors, prisoners, and clandestine informants, the study concluded that whatever the Hamlet Evaluation System might say, the district was still “strongly contested.” Even if the secure areas on the CORDS map belonged to the GVN during the day, there was still a powerful insurgent presence at night.⁹⁵

Gregg sent the paper to Saigon, where the station passed it to CORDS for coordination. The reaction there was so hostile that the station simply sat on the piece. After several inquiries about its fate, Gregg was told that the supporting data were now obsolete. He revised the assessment, including new information but arriving at the same conclusion. This version, too, languished in Saigon, and Gregg gave up.⁹⁶

Meanwhile, the Phung Hoang adviser in Quang Nam Province linked a lower rate of neutralized Viet Cong with the withdrawal of U.S. troop units. So did the adviser in adjacent Quang Ngai Province. There, allied and GVN operations in the lowland districts were forcing VC cadres into remote refuges. But in the highland districts, Phung Hoang was simply ineffective. One reason for this arose from the “live and let live” spirit of the population there, which recognized that “once the Americans leave, the VC/NVA [can] take over these districts quite easily.”⁹⁷

The significance of such observations lay in the fact that Phung Hoang, with its emphasis on a police method of operation, would have to fill much of the gap created by the departure of allied ground forces. But in Bien Hoa Province, just north of Saigon and the site of III Corps Headquarters and a major U.S. airbase, Phung Hoang did not in spring 1970 “play an aggressive . . . role in neutralizing the VCI.” The adviser in Bien Hoa listed managerial indifference, poor files, poor coordination among the participants, and an uninformed public as the main drawbacks. The most productive source of intelligence had disappeared when Census-Grievance died, and the PRU had become the primary collector as well as the “only effective Phung Hoang operational asset.”⁹⁸

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Good cooperation among GVN and U.S. participants made Long An Province, also near Saigon and strategically fully as important as Bien Hoa, a welcome exception. Farther south, in the Mekong Delta, military pressure on the VCI had always been less reliant on foreign ground forces. Although performance varied from province to province, Phung Hoang was in most cases active against the communists. The result of this work, supplemented by other GVN pacification and military operations, had forced the communists to introduce North Vietnamese Army elements into the Delta to protect the VC infrastructure and harass GVN elements.⁹⁹

Left unaddressed in CORDS and station pacification reporting in the spring of 1970 was the question, seldom examined by those immersed in operations, of what would constitute a GVN victory. This omission may have simply reflected their awareness that the administration no longer regarded the survival of an anticommunist Saigon government as a *sine qua non*. A headquarters officer noted that Communist Party chief Le Duan had in February reemphasized the primacy of political struggle, and that this meant not merely subverting the GVN but a more positive effort to strengthen the communist organization in the South. The analysis noted a contrasting American tendency to define victory in terms of land being “secured.” To the author, this criterion reflected the failure of both Vietnamization and pacification to focus on eradicating “VC political struggle activity, which may be developing as the force upon which the VC will most strongly depend in the future.”¹⁰⁰

Another latent question lay in the precept that CIA could now best contribute to pacification by collecting high-level intelligence on communist organization and planning. Walter Roberts’s experience had led him to repudiate that notion when he served as ROIC in III Corps; the problem, in his view, was not intelligence but effective action. When Don Gregg assumed the same job in 1970, he soon reached a similar conclusion. Accordingly, he devoted less attention to penetrating the VCI than to trying to “take it apart.”¹⁰¹

Gregg’s informal inspection of penetration operations in the Mekong Delta only served to reinforce the emphasis on action-oriented intelligence. His III Corps area had run consistently last, among the four regions, in numbers of “authenticated penetrations,” and Gregg came under pressure from Ted Shackley to improve on this performance. Accordingly, Gregg sent a man down to IV Corps, the statistical leader, to find out how these things were done. But the visit produced no revelations, and the officer returned with a description of a Potemkin-village penetration effort in Can Tho. He told Gregg that the agency advisers there were accepting Police Special Branch claims of access that the intelligence product did not support. And in point of fact, III

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Corps was already running, in cooperation with PSB, a district-level VC cadre who was to remain the most productive station source on communist policy and plans until the fall of Saigon in 1975.¹⁰²

Like his predecessors, Gregg soon became aware of one of the endemic weaknesses of Phung Hoang, namely, the proclivity of Vietnamese interrogators to abuse their prisoners. And he suspected that the Bien Hoa Province police chief, a Colonel Sinh, was blocking CIA access to knowledgeable prisoners. Hoping both to demonstrate the superiority of humane interrogation methods and to encourage better cooperation with CIA, Gregg intervened when he learned of a captured VC officer whom the strenuous efforts of Sinh's men had been unable to break. Having finally obtained custody in this apparently hopeless case, Gregg began with medical treatment and other demonstrations of solicitude. He then arranged a tour of Saigon, where the evident well-being of the citizenry persuaded the officer that a mendacious Communist Party had deceived him about the sufferings of compatriots under GVN control.¹⁰³

The ploy worked, the VC officer told everything he knew, and his information led to highly successful military operations, most of them by what remained in Vietnam of the U.S. First Cavalry Division. Gregg went on to set up what he called the Consolidated Debriefing House at Bien Hoa, and whether or not Colonel Sinh fully absorbed the lesson, subsequent similar successes seemed to Gregg to validate the approach.¹⁰⁴

“The Phung Hoang Fiasco”

In June 1970, two months after Ted Shackley's confident pronouncement of impending oblivion for the VCI, the station submitted a more balanced assessment that acknowledged continued communist resilience. This analysis stipulated that, after five years of trying, neither GVN nor U.S. intelligence had determined VCI strength with any precision. And if there was no reliable count, no one could track with any precision VCI growth or decline. Nevertheless, Phung Hoang neutralizations, especially police operations in the Saigon-Cholon area, had rolled up major elements of the VC apparatus, and allied military operations had drastically reduced communist access to the rural population.¹⁰⁵

So far, so good, but the station now forbore to declare victory. The capture of important agents in Saigon only revealed how effectively the VC had infiltrated the GVN, and the gains of the Accelerated Pacification Campaign remained “highly perishable,” as demonstrated in Binh Dinh and Phu Yen provinces, where the communists had “reversed positive trends almost overnight.”

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More fundamentally, in contested areas and even in some provinces where the GVN's writ prevailed, the VCI still enjoyed a "good position, because it generally has [a] more efficient organization and command mechanism than [does the] GVN." And as refugees migrated back into "newly 'secure' areas," they would become vulnerable to the underground network the communists were already working to build.¹⁰⁶

This emphasis on a covert network—the "legal" organization, in communist parlance, because its members retained their GVN documentation and status—might be seen as something forced on the communists by their heavy losses during and after Tet 1968 and the Accelerated Pacification Campaign. Indeed, COSVN Resolution 14, issued in October 1970, credited allied military power with forcing a return to a "guerrilla warfare movement" which, like a reverse Phung Hoang, would succeed by "eliminating the administrative personnel of the puppet government at the lowest levels." But subsequent directives also put renewed emphasis on population controls, intelligence penetration of pacification elements, and proselyting in ARVN and the civil society.¹⁰⁷

The station accordingly declined to draw a comforting "last gasp" interpretation of the reversion to a strategy of protracted warfare. Instead, it saw the new, more streamlined, VCI as an instrument of long-term political struggle, equally well adapted to continued guerrilla warfare or to the maneuvering expected to follow a cease-fire. Even assuming continued attrition, the VCI would in another year's time not be a "significantly less dangerous instrument than it is today." Over the long haul, three to five years hence, it might be possible to reduce it to a hard core of some 20,000 cadres. But if the Paris negotiations produced an agreement, it seemed "almost inevitable that [the] VCI would be stronger one year after a cease fire than it is now."¹⁰⁸

Robert Komer, observing from Washington, arrived at essentially the same conclusion. Having left Vietnam near the end of 1968, he returned on an inspection tour on behalf of the White House in July 1970. In the two-part report that followed his visit, he pronounced the military conflict effectively won: "We have clearly achieved a potentially decisive upper hand." But he saw the consummation of the drive toward victory as endangered by continued U.S. and GVN focus on "preparing for renewed big unit war" against an enemy who had reverted to a strategy of protracted conflict. In Komer's view, the GVN and the United States had now to improve their performance in the "political struggle," which to him meant only destroying the clandestine VC political apparatus. Attrition of the VCI still depended too heavily on the adventitious results of military activity and too little on Phung Hoang opera-

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tions aimed at identified members of the apparatus. If this were not corrected, he said, “We may yet lose what we have won at such a heavy price.”¹⁰⁹

Komer’s visits to some twenty provinces revealed just one, Dinh Tuong in the Mekong Delta, that in his judgment operated a Phung Hoang program “worthy of the name.” In the others, Komer identified various technical and bureaucratic shortcomings, including poor files, inadequate use of investigative tools like fingerprints and mug shots, and the transfer in May 1970 of the GVN’s Phung Hoang management from the prime minister’s office to the National Police. But these flaws were only symptoms of the program’s main weaknesses, which he declared to be a mediocre American advisory staff and the absence of vigorous GVN leadership.¹¹⁰

Komer thought both President Thieu and Prime Minister Khiem genuinely committed to the program, and it is curious that he did not comment on their anomalous failure to give it either institutional status or a competent, energetic manager. Komer noted that the lieutenant colonel running Phung Hoang could not be expected to exert much leverage on the generals and full colonels without whose command emphasis the program would languish. And leverage was indispensable, for “few corps commanders or province chiefs would even rate [Phung Hoang] among their first six priority tasks.” Meanwhile, on the American side, the advisory effort was “fragmented and mostly low quality,” reflecting among other things Americans’ lack of experience with either a national police or counterinsurgency operations. The result was that most district Phung Hoang centers—DIOCCs—and their provincial equivalents as well, struck Komer as mere “‘make work’ operations, where groups of unqualified low-level Vietnamese and Americans are doing a desultory job of paper-pushing.”¹¹¹

Komer’s recommendations characteristically emphasized more, and more effectively deployed, material resources. The GVN would have to supply better leadership, and the advisory effort also had to improve. As with the call for better GVN staffing, Komer identified the goal without specifying the means of its achievement. He probably did not in fact expect the agency’s return to Phung Hoang management when he said that “the U.S. advisory effort must be pulled together more effectively. I realize how much pain it would cause, but if I couldn’t find a better solution, I’d transfer [operational control] over the whole business to [CIA]. This is no reflection on Bill Colby; it’s just that he’s more than busy enough on other things. But the U.S. military assets should be transferred too.” This conditional recommendation presumably arose from Komer’s perception that, “for better or worse, CIA produced (from my own field experience) the only experienced hands who were good at the game.” The

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same judgment applied to the PRU program, once “the most effective action arm Phung Hoang ever had,” whose production was “declining greatly” at the time of Komer’s visit.¹¹²

Komer sent Colby a copy of his report, which bore the title, “The Phung Hoang Fiasco,” probably in early August. Colby’s reply, in mid-October, accepted the validity of much of Komer’s critique while insisting that pressure from Thieu and Khiem was beginning to change the attitude of subordinate commanders. Colby declined either to agree that Phung Hoang was a fiasco or to consider putting CIA back in charge of the program. He echoed the agency’s own position when he asserted that the station’s responsibility for high-level intelligence collection demanded its full attention “at current manning levels.” And refinements in the selection and training of advisers were about to yield material improvement in this phase of the operation, even under MACV management.¹¹³

The exchange continued with a letter from Komer in which he implicitly and unfavorably compared Colby’s efforts with his own in generating GVN enthusiasm for Phung Hoang. He accepted that much had since been accomplished, but worried that “the great bulk of what has been done is at U.S. initiative.” This had been the salient feature of his own tenure, but Komer now concluded that it could not continue, as “in the last analysis *only the GVN can make Phoenix work.*” In a series of emphatic rhetorical questions, Komer defined what he thought should be Colby’s agenda: *when* would Thieu assign a real leader to the police, *when* would he purge incompetent local police chiefs, *when* would he provide the necessary career incentives, and *when* would he make “JGS disgorge good personnel” for transfer to the police?¹¹⁴

Komer had by this time left the government. While he formulated his prescriptions at an office at the Rand Corporation, official Washington’s frustration with Phung Hoang was making it more receptive than Colby to the suggestion of a renewed CIA management responsibility. In December 1970, CIA Headquarters developed a contingency plan allowing CIA officers to be assigned to eight provinces—four in the Delta, three in I Corps, plus Binh Dinh—which contained half the Viet Cong infrastructure. Colby, meanwhile, responded to Komer’s complaint about a fragmented U.S. advisory structure by proposing to set up an Internal Security Directorate housingCORDS, the station’s police liaison, and USOM’s Public Safety Division. As described by the station, this opaque idea seems to have called for integratingCORDS into a part of itself. Ted Shackley ignored the anomaly, but raised other objections having mainly to do with CIA operational autonomy, and persuaded Ambassador Bunker to veto it.¹¹⁵

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Presumably reacting to Komer's other principal criticism, concerning leadership and command emphasis, Colby also suggested moving the National Police from the Interior Ministry to the Office of the Presidency. Shackley objected that the transfer would give the appearance of putting the police at the service of President Thieu's 1971 reelection bid, and got Bunker to veto this as well.¹¹⁶

The outcome largely preserved the status quo, insofar as the CIA role was concerned. Having worked since late 1966 to divest itself of the overt pacification programs—PRU and the PICs being the only exceptions—the agency had no desire to return to a lead role in the Phoenix organization.¹¹⁷

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At the end of 1970, with communist main forces still avoiding contact, the preponderance of military strength in the heavily populated areas of South Vietnam lay with the Saigon government. In Long An Province, for example, the GVN's Regional and Popular Forces totaled 16,000 men. The GVN had finally overcome its reluctance to arm a volunteer militia, and the People's Self-Defense Forces there included another 27,000 men and women and 9,000 weapons. The PRU alone had more men than the 180-odd surviving Viet Cong guerrillas. The sole remaining VC district company now contained just 12 men, and the two provincial battalions had a total of about 230.¹

This imbalance in armed force severely reduced VC access to the civilian population. Meanwhile, the GVN had finally, in 1969 and 1970, promulgated and publicized radical land reform measures. As a result, the issue of distributive justice, formerly a communist monopoly, lost much of its value as a VC recruiting inducement. The communists' military impotence had allowed some reconstitution of GVN village administration, and this in turn increased the isolation of many party organizers and administrators from their peasant base. In these circumstances, which did not exclude a continuing peasant vulnerability to communist proselyting, the deficiencies in Phung Hoang performance did not lead to a VCI resurgence, and the Vietnamization of military and security programs continued.²

Ted Shackley seems not to have shared Komer's pessimism about Phung Hoang's ability to replace the military as the main weapon against the VCI, for he continued to reduce the money and staff devoted to rural operations. He did, however, implicitly acknowledge the tendency of the light at the end of the tunnel to keep receding. In July 1970, he asked headquarters to extend by

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another year, until mid-1972, CIA funding for the PRU program. Thereafter, a “gut feeling” told him, the National Police could absorb the PRU program and deal with the VC infrastructure on its own.³

Headquarters demanded ambassadorial endorsement for this postponement and a Vietnamese commitment to assume full responsibility for PRU by July 1972. Shackley solicited both, and the money, reduced to \$1.1 million after station bargaining with General Hai, was authorized in November 1970. At this point, all U.S. military advisers had left the program, but the seventeen remaining CIA officers did not resume a province-level advisory role, working instead in Saigon and at regional level.⁴

Whether making a virtue of necessity or indirectly acknowledging serious flaws in military PRU advisers’ performance, the station now claimed that the new advisory setup had produced “noticeable improvement in liaison . . . and quality of PRU neutralization performance, as CIA personnel [are] considerably more adept than [their] military predecessors” at enforcing discriminating selection of significant VCI targets. Three of the four ARVN corps commanders had enjoined their province chiefs to use their PRUs as CIA doctrine prescribed, and although total neutralizations were down, almost two-thirds were now said to fall into the two highest categories of Viet Cong cadres.⁵

Two operations described by the station in 1971 illustrated that even after the departure of provincial advisers, PRU operations could still produce both damage to the VCI and potential embarrassment to the program’s sponsors. A deception ploy in Binh Duong Province, north of Saigon, became one of the most successful operations of early 1971. The PRU leader there doubted the bona fides of a VC sapper who had ostensibly defected to the GVN some months earlier. Surveillance by PRU cadres produced only circumstantial confirmation of his suspicion, and the PRU chief suggested provoking an overt move that would justify arrest and interrogation. He proposed a false announcement of a high-level visitor from Saigon in order to lure the suspect into an assassination attempt.⁶

The surveillance that followed the announcement—how it was accomplished is not reported—determined that the suspect had acquired two M-26 hand grenades. Arrested with these in his possession, he confessed, and identified seven other VC to his PRU interrogators. Three days later, the PRU used the information to capture five VC and then joined provincial forces to nab eight more. Further interrogations produced a snowball effect, with twenty-seven more VC arrested, including a number of GVN officials, and exploitation of these prisoners was still continuing when the station filed its report.⁷

In June, a more conventional operation took a twenty-seven-man PRU

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into a communist-controlled hamlet in Go Cong Province. The VC reported to be there could not be found, and the PRU withdrew, leaving eight of its men in an ambush position. In midafternoon, three men appeared who, when challenged, tried to escape. The PRU opened fire, killing two and wounding the other. More VC arrived, taking the PRU under fire and rescuing the wounded cadre. The PRU wanted to disengage, taking the bodies of the two slain VC as evidence of contact with the enemy. But the intensity of the enemy fire prevented this, so a PRU cadre decapitated both the dead men, and the team returned with their heads.⁸

Reinforced by a Popular Forces platoon, the PRU returned to the scene and recovered the two bodies. One of the VC was identified as a village-level deputy military affairs section chief, the other as an assistant squad leader in the VC 305th Regional Unit. The incident received only routine GVN reporting, which the station did not see until weeks later. More surprisingly, even the VC seemed to accept the event as merely reflecting the fortunes of war; three weeks after the event, they had yet to exploit it for propaganda purposes. Local officials had promptly released the bodies to relatives, and the GVN's regional PRU director thought this had helped to prevent a "major publicity problem."⁹

Meanwhile, in Saigon, neither police director general Tran Van Hai's cooperation with CIA nor his promotion to brigadier general offset Prime Minister Khiem's disapproval of both his performance and his politics. The station did not describe the political differences, but acknowledged that Hai's passivity in Phung Hoang management—he deferred all decisions to Khiem—justified the prime minister's criticism on professional grounds. In January 1971, Khiem replaced him with a relative by marriage, Major General Tran Thanh Phong, whose problems included an entourage which, along with two of his three wives, engaged in massive corruption. The station thought Phong at first unaware of the bribes they extorted in his name. By the time he found out, he had come under attack also by police subordinates who objected to his disruption of "personal 'thiefdoms' built up over the years." From his first day in office, Phong had displayed an unusual willingness to accept CIA advice, and the station hoped to see him survive, but his authority was fatally undermined by insubordination and overt peculation, and he lasted only eight months.¹⁰

During his brief tenure, General Phong willingly deployed police resources to execute operations suggested by the station. During a massive ARVN incursion into Laos and Cambodia in February 1971, the station energized him and the Special Branch chief into a flurry of police and PRU activity designed to prevent the VC from exploiting reduced ARVN participation in village secu-

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city. This brief campaign netted some 2,200 VC cadres or suspects. In April, anticipating a so-called VC highpoint associated with May Day, the station instigated a “country-wide roll-up campaign” that netted 31 VC cadres, at levels ranging from district to party region, among 560 suspects seized.¹¹

General Phong also cooperated in streamlining the unwieldy provincial interrogation program. He and the station set out to shrink the numbers of PICs from forty-two to four, relocating the remainder at the regional level and bringing their facilities up to acceptable standards. For GVN consumption, the station justified the reduction by the declining number of prisoners as military activity waned. But the primary motivation, in this context of diminishing returns, was the agency’s vulnerability to criticism of its association, however involuntary, with inhumane PIC conditions and brutality toward prisoners: “A couple of PIC ‘suicides’ coming on the heels of the complete renovation of the PICs to eliminate all possible sources of abuse, led [us] to the conclusion that nothing short of elimination of the PICs would suffice.”¹²

An “Uneasy Equilibrium”

As cease-fire negotiations inched along in Paris and the communists avoided a decisive military confrontation in South Vietnam, the conflict acquired not only a more political but also an increasingly urban character. It is not clear whether the new communist emphasis on urban struggle reflected a perceived opportunity to exploit cease-fire prospects and perhaps to sabotage the impending presidential election in Saigon, or whether it was forced on the party by its losses in the countryside. Whatever drove it, the staff of the special assistant for Vietnam Affairs saw it in mid-1971 as reflecting a standoff, with an “uneasy equilibrium between the VCI and the police in most of the countryside and . . . preparation by both sides for challenge in the cities.” Tom Donohue, the author of a SAVA paper on police effectiveness, foresaw VC efforts in the urban context to “infiltrate and subvert various political and social groups already disaffected with the GVN.” But the outcome would still be decided in the countryside, where the “relative standoff” gave the GVN “the opportunity to deliver the programs such as land reform, anti-corruption and information that will make the political difference.”¹³

Donohue’s principal concern at the moment was not, however, the political difference but the narrower question of the GVN’s ability to combat the VC organization. The police were at this point the senior GVN partner in Phung Hoang and PRU as well as custodians of the PICs and the Hamlet Informant program; they had thus become the locus of nearly all activity aimed at the VC

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apparatus. It seemed to Donohue that the police, backed up by the renamed militia, the People's Self-Defense Forces, were at that point able to suppress "overtly aggressive VC action and in general, provide an acceptable level of law enforcement." But this, while enough to "prevent the VC from actually taking over rural areas . . . is not sufficient to prevent the VC from rebuilding their organization in preparation for more aggressive activity subsequent to U.S. withdrawal."¹⁴

The problems lay both in the nature of the task and in the professional competence needed to deal with it. Much of the VCI effort involved "night-time proselyting, taxing, recruiting, etc., the suppression of which requires highly-motivated, highly-skilled personnel, teamwork, and intelligence. None, let alone all of these qualities, is available in either the National Police [or] the PSDF." The shortcomings of these entities were aggravated by endemic problems like spotty cooperation from the GVN military and the resilience of the "VC shadow supply system" in an "atmosphere of accommodation and corruption." As Donohue saw it, both sides were now engaging in "local accommodations" aimed more at survival than victory. In these circumstances, he thought, assuming "relative political stability and strong GVN leadership," the "GVN police and security forces . . . have a 50/50 chance of muddling through in their fashion."¹⁵

Saigon Station's four regional officers thought the odds less favorable. Don Gregg recalled being summoned with the other three to Saigon to brief the "aloof, Olympian" Ambassador Bunker on conditions in the countryside. Then nearing the end of his first year in Vietnam, Gregg had concluded that the contest was one "to which no happy ending is possible," for he thought the population sensed that Hanoi's commitment to victory would outlast that of the United States. In this connection, a report from a woman agent had made a deep impression. A B-52 raid on a VC bunker complex had buried alive the installation's commander, a charismatic officer whom the survivors struggled frantically to rescue. They dug him out, still alive, and upon regaining consciousness he assured his troops that the Americans would "never get closer" than they had just done, and "we will win the war."¹⁶

The other three ROICs were also "deeply pessimistic" about GVN prospects for reasons that included uneven ARVN performance and a vast "shadow economy" of dealings with the VC that compromised its many participants on the GVN side. Bunker listened to their presentation, but said nothing. Retired major general Charles Timmes, retained by the station to exploit his many ARVN acquaintances, then summarized what he had been told on a recent cycle of visits to various commanders. All had assured him that things

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were going well, and Timmes said he shared their optimism. Bunker then brought the session to a close: "Thank you, gentlemen, I find all of this highly encouraging."¹⁷

An incredulous Gregg later cornered a Bunker aide to ask if the ambassador had missed the majority's point. Not at all, replied the aide, it was simply that he could not risk having it reach the press that he had given a sympathetic hearing to CIA pessimism.¹⁸

The reservations expressed by Tom Donohue in the SAVA paper about police and militia capabilities came at a time when U.S. officials in Saigon, apparently including station management, were giving up on the interagency approach represented by Phung Hoang. Its most fervent American proponent, William Colby, was gone, and the American commitment to it faded with his departure. The GVN agencies participating in Phung Hoang had never cooperated with each other, and had persisted in assigning to it what CORDS described as "poorly qualified and poorly motivated" personnel. The centers themselves were often insecure, risking the compromise of sources and information, and command lines had remained vague.¹⁹

The initiative came, as usual, from the American side. MACV recommended in October that the police begin assuming the entire responsibility for the attack on the VC infrastructure by the beginning of 1972. This meant dismantling the Phoenix advisory structure, a process to which the station would be essentially an observer, its only equity being a relabeled office in CORDS for its PSB and PRU advisers.²⁰

Although he had never succeeded in getting his compatriots to give Phung Hoang their best effort, Prime Minister Khiem balked at dissolving the program. He proposed instead to chair an expanded Central Phung Hoang Committee that would lend the authority of its title to the work of the police, who would assume full operating authority in mid-1972. Meanwhile, the gradual American disengagement would continue, and when the last CORDS advisers departed at the end of 1972, CIA's liaison with the PSB would once again constitute the U.S. participation in pacification intelligence.²¹

Preparations for U.S. withdrawal from the Phung Hoang program took place against a background of conflicting perceptions in the station, as elsewhere, about the nature of the current challenge to the GVN. These differences did not much affect program decisions, which were being driven by the political imperative of Vietnamization, but they illuminated the continuing absence of a consensus on what the Saigon government had to do to survive.

At Bien Hoa, Don Gregg thought civilian loyalties of equal importance to the morale of the GVN's main constituency in the military and the government.

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Writing in January 1972, he found no reason to modify the pessimism he had expressed to Ambassador Bunker the previous summer. He thought that the

GVN has not yet reached the point, and probably never will, where it can inspire the population as a whole to take the small daily actions against the VC which, multiplied by the thousands, would spell the end of the war. In the daily patterns of life, particularly in rural areas, there are contacts, at the edge of the jungle by day, and in the villages by night, through which the VC are able to gain support for their movement. They achieve this by a practical blending of threat, propaganda, and economic incentive. Their terrorism is, by and large, very carefully applied, to so-called “traitors,” to some aggressive village leaders, and to some who by any standards are corrupt. Their propaganda picks at the sore point of war weariness.

Loggers and farmers willingly paid taxes to “ply safely what would otherwise be hazardous livelihoods,” and this kind of accommodation was encouraged by the “‘common knowledge’ of extensive corruption throughout the GVN.”²²

Gregg did not infer from all this that the Viet Cong enjoyed widespread popular support. On the contrary, should the VC “appear in the streets, as they did in the Tet attacks of 1968 and 1969, the people will again cut them down without compunction.” He did, however, link the VC and North Vietnamese potential for mounting further attacks with this “spotty motivational pattern,” implying that the communists could count on the logistic support of a complaisant civilian population. Therefore, unless the GVN quickly attracted more active loyalty, and Gregg doubted that it would, 1972 would surely see a major military test in the provinces around Saigon. In the long term, the poor prospects for mobilizing active public support meant that the GVN would have to rely essentially on repression of the VCI to establish uncontested authority in the countryside. Gregg found it ironic that, even “at this late date, it is still Americans who are spearheading an effort so crucial to the survival” of the GVN.²³

Ted Shackley, preparing to depart after three years in Saigon, had served his entire tour of duty while the United States was reducing its commitment to the GVN under the Vietnamization rubric. During this period, as we have seen, CIA-supported programs to generate peasant loyalty to the GVN were transferred to the Vietnamese or dissolved. Shackley’s correspondence with headquarters never discussed the importance of peasant loyalties, and in practice he shared Don Gregg’s perception that the essential ingredient of victory was a successful campaign to suppress the VC infrastructure.

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But Shackley did not associate himself with the view, held by some of CIA's most prominent counterinsurgency practitioners, that the VCI relied exclusively on coercion to mobilize the peasantry. By his own intuitive estimate—like most experienced observers, he distrusted the Hamlet Evaluation System—as many as 80 percent of the villagers would, if left to their own devices, abstain from supporting the Viet Cong. Shackley specified that “left to their own devices” meant the absence not only of coercion but even of such anodyne pressures as requests for favors from relatives in the movement. If his guess was anywhere near the mark, the VC continued in early 1972 to enjoy the spontaneous support of at least a fifth of the rural population, and pressure of varying kinds and degrees accounted for an indeterminate number of other collaborators.²⁴

Thomas Polgar quickly developed his own interpretation of the balance of forces when he arrived in January 1972 to become the last chief of the CIA Station in Vietnam. At first, he adopted the line that had guided CIA pacification practice under Ted Shackley. In an early February conversation with the new National Police commissioner, Colonel Nguyen Khac Binh, he asserted that “the war in Vietnam would eventually be won, not by military action, but by the acquisition of intelligence followed by police action.” A few months later, he explicitly repudiated the notion that popular political loyalties might affect the outcome of the struggle. He told outgoing treasury secretary John Connally, visiting Saigon in late June, that the Vietnamese were “content to live with [the] Thieu regime [and in the] long run, whoever controls the machinery of government can be sure of having adequate even if passive acceptance by [the] population.”²⁵

Polgar reprised the same theme a week later in a briefing of visiting White House aide Major General Alexander Haig. The COS maintained that pacification was not a “question of [a] ‘fight for hearts and minds’ but simply one of who controls city hall.” And the survival of the VCI depended on support from the North Vietnamese Army. If Hanoi's forces were defeated, “there should be no problem with pacification.” Polgar dismissed the VCI as a significant factor, even where the North Vietnamese Army was providing security for it: the “question was not one of numbers but of potential and effectiveness, and we give [the] VC low marks on both counts.”²⁶

The Easter Offensive

However debatable the thesis that the survival of the VCI depended on the North Vietnamese Army, Hanoi had at this point demonstrated its impatience

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with the protracted struggle it had decreed in 1969. Tom Polgar's remarks to Secretary Connally and General Haig came as the armed forces of the GVN, supported by massive U.S. air bombardment, were gradually repelling the North Vietnamese invasion that came to be known as the Easter offensive. Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker had told President Nixon in January 1972 that the enemy "would have to 'mount a major military offensive . . . to prove his public claims that Vietnamization and pacification are failures.'" The North Vietnamese fulfilled this prophecy in late March when they sent all but one of their fourteen divisions, supported by armor and long-range artillery, into the South. U.S. ground forces in Vietnam consisted by then of just one infantry brigade, and the burden of ground combat fell on Saigon's regulars and territorials.²⁷

The invasion, which struck into all four ARVN corps areas, aimed at defeating Vietnamization and at achieving final victory. But the communists hedged their bets by using it to reconstitute the VCI, now down to an estimated 56,000 cadres, with North Vietnamese fillers. Again, ARVN frustrated the effort to break its will to resist, but the assault did weaken Saigon's hold on a substantial part of the countryside it had reclaimed after Tet 1968. This included some of the provinces nearest Saigon, including Hau Nghia, Binh Duong, Phuoc Tuy, and parts of Long An and Tay Ninh. Pacification management also suffered, as Hanoi's troops overran twelve district Phung Hoang centers and one at province level.²⁸

While South Vietnamese regulars and territorials fought to stem the attack, Phung Hoang action resources, mainly the PRUs, were diverted to support military operations, much as they had been at Tet in 1968. Where the action was heaviest, the PRU suffered proportionately. The PRU in Binh Long Province was committed to help resist the bloody North Vietnamese Army siege of An Loc, and the station said it used an M-72 LAW missile to destroy a Soviet-made T-54, "perhaps the first tank stopped by ground forces at An Loc." By late April, twenty-four members of the Binh Long PRU were dead and four of the remaining seven had been wounded.²⁹

Some of the other PRUs also distinguished themselves. The Kontum Province unit repelled a North Vietnamese Army sapper attack, then joined the ARVN counterattack. In Quang Tri, the PRU rescued a downed American helicopter pilot, although enemy fire prevented recovering a slain crewman's body. PRU ambushes in Thua Thien and Gia Dinh provinces inflicted losses on numerically superior forces, and the Gia Dinh operation disrupted a communist move in Thu Duc District, on the outskirts of Saigon. In Binh Dinh, the chief of that beleaguered province described the PRU as his only trustworthy

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unit. There were other such achievements, and the GVN chose a PRU cadre over all of ARVN's combatants as the year's outstanding soldier, a distinction that brought him an audience with President Thieu.³⁰

Some analysts interpreted the Easter offensive as a move to reverse the gains made by GVN pacification programs. CIA in Saigon concluded that the offensive facilitated the reemergence of the VC infrastructure, creating safe havens that allowed political and administrative cadres to infiltrate villages from which they had been driven out. The assault had also permitted the VC to insert agents into columns of refugees trying to escape the fighting. An embassy telegram cited the political and antipacification themes of COSVN Directive 43, which called for broadening territorial control, subverting GVN armed forces, and increasing access to potential recruits and laborers. Some reporting asserted that specially trained cadres had come down from the North to support the political program. The police-Phung Hoang apparatus responded to this threat with a frantic roundup of VC suspects. Almost 16,000 were arrested, of whom 10,000 were still in custody in late July.³¹

Grim resistance by ARVN and massive bombing by U.S. B-52s combined to break the North Vietnamese siege of An Loc, and ARVN reestablished access by road in mid-June. Meanwhile, the Easter offensive did not affect the GVN's timetable for transfer of Phung Hoang responsibilities and resources, and the National Police took these over on 12 June 1972. Despite the surge of arrests during the Easter offensive, the station saw Phung Hoang operations as continuing to be "impaired" by lack of GVN command emphasis at the local level. At least some of the remaining province advisers shared this view; in Hau Nghia, for example, they came to see police management as ruining the program with incompetence and corruption.³²

Having survived a mortal threat with the defeat of the Easter offensive, the GVN faced the prospect that Hanoi might offer settlement terms, damaging to Saigon's interests, that the impending U.S. election would make it impossible for President Nixon to refuse. Never in any case an advocate of participatory democracy, President Thieu reacted by tightening GVN controls over the peasantry. In September, he abolished the election of hamlet officials and returned to the Diemist system of appointment by province and district chiefs. Polgar protested this to Prime Minister Khiem, less for the substance of the decision than for its proximity to U.S. elections, but Thieu was adamant, asserting that "in the current situation great firmness must be shown." Meanwhile, his pacification bureaucracy, perennially disposed to set goals it had no hope of achieving, declared its intention to reduce the number of confirmed VC cadres by 50 percent in the next twelve months.³³

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The Atrophy of U.S. Leverage

The continuing shrinkage of U.S. participation in Phung Hoang reduced American leverage proportionately, and both planning and implementation of operations against the communist rural organization became the exclusive concern of the GVN. The last CIA officer to direct the Phoenix advisory staff left in mid-November 1972, and the last forty-five military advisers were out by the end of December. Early in the year, according to CORDS figures, the size of the VCI had been reduced from some 84,000, at Tet 1968, to a little more than 56,000. Targeted operations under the Phung Hoang rubric accounted for a fifth of the Viet Cong taken out of action, while conventional military activity produced half the VC losses. The remaining 30 percent consisted of deserters attracted by the government's Chieu Hoi—"open arms"—program.³⁴

This attrition of the VCI was accompanied by the perennial failures of GVN leadership and administrative practice that had originally prompted the American pacification initiatives. In February 1972, the station noted indications of declining willingness among PRU cadres to "lay their lives on the line as they have done in the past." It attributed this trend to "apathy on the part of the GVN, plus the [government's] failure to pay the death and disability benefits that have been due since July 1971." The solution seemed just around the corner, inasmuch as station efforts to "awaken the [police] to the many problems confronting the PRU have borne fruit." The police command was improving recruitment and pay procedures, and Director General Phong had asserted his interest in keeping the program intact after CIA withdrawal. And whatever the managerial and consequent morale problems, most PRUs had done well during the Easter offensive. As of mid-1972, the GVN reported the program to be neutralizing VCI members at a rate of more than 500 a month, with captures exceeding kills by nine to one.³⁵

CIA sponsorship of the Provincial Reconnaissance Units ended in July 1972. Tom Polgar promised Police Commissioner Binh some additional material support from a surplus in the budget for the police, but the program now depended on the Vietnamese. The GVN began by renaming it, and it became first the Special Reconnaissance Groups and then the D-7 Section of the Police Special Branch. Assimilation proceeded only slowly, "partly because D-7 predecessors were totally American programs." Indeed, the station's senior man in Military Region 1 (also known as I Corps, covering the four northernmost provinces of South Vietnam) saw the D-7 units in his five provinces as neither integrated into the police command structure nor responsive to any national-level authority. The province chiefs retained operational control, but even

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this authority was undermined, as in Quang Nam, by unit leaders appealing to their regional supervisors when they found province-level instructions uncongenial.³⁶

Mutual antipathy between PRU personnel and the uniformed police aggravated the assimilation problem. "D-7 regards [the police] as cowards and inept amateurs at D-7's trade," while the uniformed police saw D-7 as populated by "thugs." When D-7 was issued uniforms in January 1973, the recipients promptly sold them. They explained to a regional police adviser that they preferred not to abdicate the "healthy and protective respect" their PRU service had earned them by dressing like the cowardly police and thus inviting VC attack. CIA in Saigon anticipated more such problems and further delays but thought that, whatever the problems of integration, the Vietnamese saw it as "in their own interest and are proceeding in their own way at their own speed."³⁷

This Vietnamese interest seems to have intensified even before the conclusion of a cease-fire agreement in January 1973. The station later discovered that, as early as October 1972, the GVN anticipated a terror campaign after the formal end of hostilities; the Viet Cong had already bombed a hamlet market, with dozens of casualties. The GVN resolved to fight fire with fire, and by mid-July 1973 had carried out assassinations "throughout South Vietnam." The station understood these to be the work of Special Branch teams that included members of D-7. The station told headquarters it had traced the authority for this campaign to Police Commissioner Binh, but dismissed the possibility that he would have taken such an initiative without the assent of President Thieu.³⁸

The embassy thought the GVN to be violating the terms of the Paris agreement with this and other activity against the VCI, and the station undertook to put the matter in perspective. As long as the VC waged the "'political' struggle," with its "familiar tactics of assassination, abduction, tax extortion, and terrorism, the GVN will respond with some kind of counter-subversive and internal security program." In the first week of May 1973, the Viet Cong in MR 4, covering the Mekong Delta, had conducted thirteen assassinations, nineteen abductions, and terrorist bombings that killed or injured thirty-two people. "These acts would seem on balance clearly to constitute a greater violation of Article 3C of the Paris agreements than the GVN response."³⁹

Later in May, the station dismissed embassy concerns about a reported doubling of "operations" against the VCI. It pointed out that, as used by the police, the term included "surveillance, investigation, arrests, and walks in the sun." The point, as CIA observers saw the matter, was the continuing cycle of

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violence in which the GVN was indeed participating, but by no means unilaterally: “It is the act, not the plan, which demonstrates violation of the agreement; and there are a lot of KIA’s [killed in action] to prove violations by both sides.”⁴⁰

In this continuing low-level war of attrition, COS Polgar saw the “military and security balance” as having shifted in favor of the GVN. In early June 1973, he wrote that “the GVN has been forging ahead and consolidating its control over most of the populated areas of South Vietnam.” In this connection, he cited a directive from the VC command in the lower Delta that acknowledged GVN capabilities larger than previously recognized, and that lamented the weakness of VC political activity. In February 1974, Polgar made more explicit his view of the police contribution to this trend, telling headquarters that the National Police had become “a principal bulwark of the government and more than a match for the VC infrastructure.”⁴¹

As usual, the worm’s-eye view was more jaundiced. The station’s Can Tho office complained in mid-1973 that police efficiency in MR 4 was limited by the “continued practice of assigning sycophant PSB and [National Police] officials at province level.” The Nha Trang office noted the decline also of the former PRU, which it said was getting little support from either the police or MR 2 province chiefs. Except for “an occasional reconnaissance mission,” PRU activity was limited to efforts to start “agent operations using people who live in or near contested areas.”⁴²

The farther the observer was removed from the action, the greater his disposition to discount particular GVN failures and to judge by apparently more favorable general trends. Bob Layton, one of the Intelligence Directorate’s most experienced Vietnam analysts, later recalled that as assistant national intelligence officer for Southeast Asia he shared the upbeat view. The GVN seemed to be doing progressively better, in early 1974, holding off the North Vietnamese Army and expanding its rural presence. Only in retrospect did Layton come to see the regime as “rotten at the core” and doomed to succumb.⁴³

A Military Decision

In any case, the implementation of the Paris agreements in January 1973 intensified the CIA’s focus, and that of all U.S. officials, on the military balance. The question of rural political loyalties, once held by so many to be the key to the outcome, was ignored or the answer taken for granted. A mistake in the analytic context, this omission had no practical effect on policy, for the United States had abdicated any effort to influence the “hearts and minds” of uncom-

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mitted peasants. By 1974, there was no American interest either in positive programs of rural political and social mobilization or in new efforts to deter or punish collaboration with the Viet Cong.

Developments in late 1974 only intensified the preoccupation with the military standoff. The station's best source on communist policy decisions, the district-level VC cadre in Tay Ninh Province, reported on 8 November that Hanoi had decided to launch "an all-out offensive which may well be more intense than the 1972 offensive." COSVN had already ordered the collection of rice, salt, and other foodstuffs "in preparation for a long offensive." It counted on continued access to the peasantry for this purpose, instructing local cadres to "buy two-thirds of the civilian production and let the farmers take the rest to the strategic hamlets [*sic*: presumably a reference to the GVN's New Life Hamlets]." ⁴⁴

The campaign began on 13 December 1974 with an assault on ARVN positions in the highland province of Phuoc Long. The province fell three weeks later, and Ban Me Thuot, once the center of the CIDG program, followed on 10 March 1975. President Thieu tried to shorten ARVN defense lines by ordering the evacuation of Pleiku and Kontum provinces in the Central Highlands, but a near vacuum of planning and supervision turned the withdrawal into a rout. As ARVN tried to fight its way to the coast, North Vietnamese Army forces were occupying Quang Tri Province, just below the DMZ. By 1 April, Hanoi's forces occupied the northern half of South Vietnam. ⁴⁵

Some ARVN forces put up desperate resistance. The Eighteenth Division, based at Xuan Loc, east of Saigon, fought off three North Vietnamese Army divisions for almost two weeks. But such heroism served only to delay the end. The hope of preserving a rump state based on Saigon and the Mekong Delta quickly faded, and President Thieu resigned on 12 April. After an additional two weeks of suspense, North Vietnamese rockets and heavy artillery shells began falling on the Saigon airfield. On 29 April, continuing bombardment ended the use of U.S. transport aircraft. A frantic helicopter lift from Tan Son Nhut Airbase, and from sites in the city that included the embassy's grounds and roof, rescued several thousand Americans and Vietnamese before it ended in the predawn hours of 30 April 1975. North Vietnamese tanks rolled unopposed into Saigon, and the communists took over city hall. ⁴⁶

CONCLUSION

The Limits of Pragmatism

The catastrophic failure of any undertaking, especially one as massive as the American intervention in South Vietnam, tends to evoke a search for scapegoats. These are most commonly found in the leaders of the failed enterprise, when the observer is hostile to it, or in malign outside forces, when the observer favors it. The collapse of South Vietnam has certainly generated its share of such scapegoats, which competing interpretations find in incompetent U.S. and corrupt South Vietnamese officials, politically self-serving American presidents, a treasonous press, or a pusillanimous Congress.

Despite the pejorative qualifiers that invariably accompany each of these theories, all of them have some explanatory force. U.S. policy makers and program managers did in fact fail to comprehend what they were up against, both when they tried to help Saigon win the allegiance of the peasantry and when they tried to destroy the Viet Cong. GVN corruption did sap the authority of the Saigon regime, and the U.S. presidents of the period always—at least eventually—accommodated their Vietnam policy to the demands of American domestic politics. Press coverage of U.S. and civilian casualties and of intractable GVN weakness fueled public opposition to the war, and the Congress eventually forced a drastic reduction in the American commitment to Saigon's survival.

Nevertheless, any interpretation that relies on scapegoats sacrifices understanding for the comfort of a simple but illusory certitude. It begins by assuming that the objective was attainable, and that defeat is to be explained only in terms of avoidable human failure or deliberate sabotage. But one of the first questions to emerge from the record of CIA participation in rural pacification in South Vietnam is precisely whether the job could be done at all. If pacification meant any more than preventing the insurgency from expelling the GVN

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from the countryside, immense obstacles always confronted its implementation. These included communist discipline and the superior morale of the Viet Cong, perpetually feeble government in Saigon, and persisting conceptual and organizational confusion on the American side.

If it cannot be demonstrated that the enterprise was doomed from the start, it is also far from certain that avoidable mistakes or faintheartedness account for its failure. Taking into account the shallow thinking encouraged by cold war fervor, intractable institutional rigidities in both the South Vietnamese and U.S. governments, and the predictable reactions of American presidents and electorates to a protracted, indecisive war, it is unlikely that a successful pacification formula was ever a practical possibility.

Indeed, as the CIA record makes clear, U.S. and GVN pacification initiatives always arose in an atmosphere of crisis. From Ed Lansdale's civic action work to the embassy's Counterinsurgency Plan of 1961 through the Accelerated Pacification Campaign of late 1968, the communist presence in the countryside—even when attributed solely to “terror”—was always correctly seen as more dynamic than that of the GVN. The immediate goal of the Americans and South Vietnamese was always to stave off defeat, or at best to restore the status quo ante, and the deployment of U.S. ground forces in 1965 reflected the perception of U.S. officials that the insurgency had won, that the GVN was about to collapse.

Even after U.S. forces established military equilibrium, pacification officials acknowledged that the vitality of the insurgent organization remained unimpaired. At that point, after the insurgency had become essentially a support base for the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese armies, pacification could succeed only if it denied essential peasant support to the communist military. This it never achieved.

Nevertheless, U.S. officials persisted in the hope that communist will would eventually falter, and the GVN would not only survive but become a self-reliant nation-state. It was never certain, of course, that the communists would stay the course; they could at any time have decided that the cost of annexing the South outweighed the benefits. But they never displayed any sign of giving up, and American hope for ultimate victory in the countryside had to find its justification elsewhere.

Unexamined Assumptions

U.S. officials found this justification in a set of assumptions that skirted essential questions about the relative capacities of the GVN and the Viet Cong to

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win the cooperation of the peasantry. These assumptions were seriously flawed, and they consistently distorted American perceptions about political dynamics in the countryside.

The CIA experience with rural pacification in South Vietnam illustrates both the enormity of the challenge and the ways in which agency officials understood and responded to that challenge. Aside from the U.S. Information Agency, whose tiny resources and narrow charter prevented its playing a major role, CIA was the first U.S. agency to treat the Vietnamese insurgency as at least partly a political phenomenon. What agency officers thought they were doing about that phenomenon, especially before the commitment of U.S. ground forces, is in effect what the U.S. government thought it was doing. The uninhibited correspondence that flowed between the Saigon Station and CIA Headquarters throughout the conflict reveals the assumptions and attitudes that drove program recommendations, and suggests the limitations that the collective mind-set imposed on both analysis and effective action.

Perhaps the most important assumption driving agency interpretations of the insurgency saw the Viet Cong as relying essentially on coercion—“terror”—to maintain their presence in the countryside. No matter how often defied by experience, this belief consistently dominated the rationale for the programs that CIA proposed or supported, just as it dominated all U.S. policy and program planning. The American abhorrence of communism made it easy to envision a helpless Vietnamese peasantry groaning under the heel of an ideologically alien invader and waiting to be rescued. This interpretation sometimes acknowledged the evident popular appeal of VC propaganda and programs, but dismissed it as meretricious and fragile, something to be exposed when the expansion and refinement of the pacification programs remedied GVN failures in the countryside.¹

This formula rationalized even long-term communist dominance in places like Quang Ngai and Binh Dinh, where peasant adherence to the Viet Cong was attributed to ignorance of a better alternative. No common interest between the Viet Cong and the peasantry, no rational basis for peasant adherence to the movement, could be admitted. That the Communist Party, far from being an alien presence, had deep roots in peasant society sometimes intruded on American consciousness, but its implications had little influence on U.S. policy or program content.

A perennial difficulty with the American notion of the communist as wanton terrorist arose from the consistently disciplined behavior of even low-level VC, nearly all drawn from the peasantry, and from their superior morale even in conditions of extraordinary risk and privation. Most Americans dealt with

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this phenomenon, especially remarkable before Hanoi accelerated the militarization of the conflict in late 1964, by postulating with case officer Stuart Methven a “disciplined automaton.” This notion left open, of course, the question of how these mindless pawns got that way. If they were themselves forced into the movement, at what level were the coercers no longer themselves coerced? Surely not everyone but the Politburo was working under duress. And if there could be voluntary adherence at cadre levels, there was no reason why even lower-level membership could not also be a matter of choice.

It is now clear that Hanoi directed an insurgency based on an indigenous cadre organization drawn largely from the Southern peasantry. The motivation of individual cadres varied widely, but by the mid-1960s, substantial research by such as the Rand Corporation began to illuminate its complexities. Most agency officers, like most other Americans, failed to adopt the more nuanced interpretations that this work suggested. Instead, they clung to the perception of the Viet Cong as a kind of abstraction, a shadowy movement whose discipline and energy derived solely—by means left unexplored—from the despotism in Hanoi. Whatever its source, this energy seemed inexhaustible, sometimes even to determined optimists like Robert Komer and William Colby. Indeed, the Phoenix label might more aptly have been applied to the insurgency than to the effort to suppress it.²

Even while proclaiming the political character of the war and acknowledging continued communist influence over the peasantry, CIA and other U.S. officials often entertained another perception of the Viet Cong, that of common criminal. If the GVN was legitimate and its intentions benign, Americans could see no principled basis for trying to overthrow it, especially by a movement whose authority relied on terror. This notion could coexist with a view of the conflict as a civil war, for those who used the term did not acknowledge that it implied a claim to political legitimacy by the communists as well as by the GVN.

None of this is to say that Viet Cong techniques for recruiting, organizing, and administering relied exclusively on gentle persuasion. Even before 1965, when the new emphasis on military action intensified the communist demand for manpower, villagers under VC domination were complaining of conscription, heavy taxation, regimentation and harsh travel controls, and violent retribution for the recalcitrant. But coercion, especially as a means of recruitment, was used as a supplement, not as a primary tool, and the insurgents devoted enormous effort to the “conversion” of conscripts and even of men blackmailed into service with the VC.³

Despite all this, the American search for a successful pacification formula

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never took adequately into account the positive elements in the motivation of many, perhaps most, Viet Cong. Nor did it acknowledge the web of family and other personal relationships that bound even the most passive of villagers to members of the VCI and the communist military. Finally, there was only sporadic U.S. recognition, and then mostly at the working level, that GVN coercion was seen by the peasant as arbitrary and corrupt. It therefore alienated him at least as much as did VC violence, which was more likely to be administered according to a comprehensible rationale, and was therefore more predictable.⁴

The Peasantry and the GVN

Unexamined preconceptions governed CIA perceptions about the peasantry and the GVN just as much as they shaped the prevailing image of the Viet Cong. The first of these assumptions, all the more consequential for its logical inconsistency, saw the peasant as at the same time politically passive and hostile toward the Viet Cong. In this view, the rice farmer wished a pox on both houses, hoping simply to be left alone, even while he harbored at least latent stirrings of anticommunism. He was thus seen as disposed to defend himself—or at least to be defended—against the communists even when he was not yet ready to give active allegiance to the GVN. That this assumption sometimes proved to be valid, especially with religious and ethnic minorities, encouraged its erroneous expansion into the first axiom of pacification.

If the peasantry often displayed disappointingly little eagerness to resist the communists, agency officers and others could attribute this not only to the ruthlessness of the communist apparatus but to economic privation. This, the second axiom of CIA and all U.S. counterinsurgency activity in Vietnam, echoed the quasi-Marxist interpretation of people like Kennedy adviser Walt W. Rostow, who saw third world insurgencies as economic phenomena, driven by the stresses of modernization and exploited but not caused by an expansionist communist bloc. Lyndon Johnson largely accepted this view when he asserted that “the war on human misery and want is as fundamental to the successful resolution of the Vietnam conflict as are our military operations to ward off aggression.” Johnson’s formulation, in turn, echoed DCI John McCone’s suggestion to him in March 1965 that the increased production facilitated by agricultural cooperatives and extension services would give farmers “a good reason to resist communist appeals.”⁵

Whatever the attraction of future prosperity, there is no evidence that poverty, as distinct from perceptions of economic injustice, fueled the insurgency. But the agency’s failure to articulate just what it meant when it called the

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insurgency a political conflict led many of its Saigon operatives to believe that peasant loyalty could be bought with a combination of economic benefits and physical security. William Colby's *Lost Victory* is replete with references to an undefined "modernization," a process that, if vigorously implemented, would win the countryside for the GVN. Even among agency managers with a smaller personal commitment than Colby's to the potential of the CIA programs, a link between economic progress and political loyalty tended to be taken for granted. That the VC had never offered the prospect of material plenty as a proselyting incentive seems never to have shaken agency or U.S. government faith in its motivating power.

Behind the faith in physical security and economic incentives lay an American perception, apparently shared by most GVN officials, of a peasantry whose outlook and interests were restricted to the family. George Carver articulated this view in a speech that explicitly denied the presence of any broader values, such as nationalism. To Carver, the peasant was simply not "politicized in our sense of the term," and to the extent that the central government impinged on his consciousness at all, he saw it as something alien and hostile.⁶

However numerous the peasants who fit this description, it clearly did not apply to the Viet Cong, whose nationalist and socialist pretensions provided their peasant-based apparatus a mental horizon and a set of interests and values far broader than family and village. Carver and others who saw the Vietnamese peasant as little more than an apolitical pack animal overlooked that the VC were concerned, not with the irredeemably passive element—which might indeed respond only to the threat of sanctions—but with those peasants capable of becoming self-motivated servants of the cause. Neither Carver nor any other American observer seems to have noticed that the two sides had chosen different targets for their respective efforts to engage the peasantry. For the United States and the GVN, the object was the population at large, to be secured, protected, or controlled. For the VC, the object was the potential leadership cadre, the villager whose energy and dedication would ensure the cooperation of his less self-determined fellow villagers.

This image of the peasant as totally passive except in matters of immediate personal or family interest encouraged agency and other U.S. officials to join the GVN in treating him essentially as an object, not as an active participant in a common enterprise. From such a perspective, the peasant's role in the political life of the country need not extend beyond voting for approved candidates and taking up arms, when called upon to do so, against the Viet Cong. This view also implicitly recognized what amounted to the class entitlements of the military and land-owning establishments fostered by the French. In practice, it

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asked of the GVN only that it administer the peasantry with enough efficiency and noblesse oblige benevolence to belie the communist propaganda vision of a countryside in neocolonial chains.⁷

With respect to the GVN itself, the agency—and collective American—mind-set began by assuming its unquestionable claim to legitimacy. Even in the most formal, juridical sense, this was open to question, for the existence of South Vietnam rested on Ngo Dinh Diem's unilateral repudiation, backed by the United States, of the provision of the 1954 Geneva Accords calling for elections in both North and South. But the real problem was not merely to administer but to create an autonomous nation-state where none had existed since the late eighteenth century, when the decaying Nguyen dynasty invited the French into its southern domain. As CIA officers discovered in 1954, the Viet Minh then controlled more of the South Vietnamese countryside than did Ngo Dinh Diem. The task of the new Saigon government was not merely to assert legitimacy but to establish sovereignty.⁸

The American inability to see the Viet Cong as a vital, organic part of rural society, even when its practices generated peasant resentment, inevitably distorted the U.S. perspective also on the GVN's relationship to its peasant base. It prevented a general recognition that the peasant sometimes found the Saigon government to be a substantially more alien presence than he did the VC.

Here, more than in any other aspect of the commitment to South Vietnam, agency and other officials almost reflexively avoided facing the implications of the GVN's shaky authority in the countryside. To be sure, many at the working level both in the field and at CIA Headquarters saw the problem. But for the most part, the managerial level did not. Like their superiors and the policy makers in Washington, station chiefs from Ed Lansdale to Bill Colby to Tom Polgar treated successive Saigon regimes as if their anticommunism and the fact of U.S. sponsorship made their legitimacy unassailable.

But for the South Vietnamese, political legitimacy was precisely the issue. For those outside the GVN's military and sectarian constituencies, Ho Chi Minh embodied and reflected the impulse to expel the vestiges of the colonial power that had dominated Vietnam since the nineteenth century. For people whose basic motivation involved nationalism and independence, the exactions and cruelties of communist practice were acceptable, however unpleasant. Meanwhile, the GVN and its followers remained ineluctably tied to the foreign support that had erected and maintained the Southern regime.

From this perspective, it appears that the much-debated question of American leverage begged the question of the GVN's ability, not just its willingness, to do what U.S. advisers thought necessary for its survival. Recognizing

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that only a self-reliant GVN could defeat the insurgency, advisers like William Colby and Robert Komer deplored what they saw as an American tendency to substitute pressure for persuasion. But the United States was dealing with a deeply conservative, often outright reactionary South Vietnamese officer corps that could not have accommodated U.S. policy preferences without losing its own identity. Arm-twisting, productive or not, followed when persuasion necessarily failed.⁹

This is easier to see now, for at least until 1968 there were enough like-minded GVN officials to encourage the American hope that the exception they represented might become the rule. But with the decline of the CIA-sponsored pacification programs after Tet 1968, and especially of those aimed at ingratiating the GVN with the peasantry, the Saigon government showed that it still found uncongenial any kind of power-sharing with the peasantry. Indeed, the GVN lacked even the wholehearted commitment of its own urbanized middle-class constituency, which looked with “cynicism and scorn,” in analyst George Allen’s phrase, on the generals’ corruption and incompetence.

Meanwhile, as Allen explained to DCI Helms, the VC had replaced traditional local government with “youthful cadre imbued with revolutionary zeal and Marxist ‘scientific’ efficiency.” If the real issue was not the hearts and minds of the peasant masses, but rather the relative tenacity and competence of the rival elites, the GVN was competing from a position of grievous weakness.¹⁰

Strategy in an Analytic Void

Given the strength of American assumptions about the nature of the struggle, it is not surprising that program decisions were made with no rigorous analysis of the insurgency or of the GVN’s ability to combat it. Any such study would have revealed the structural obstacles to success. But anticommunist zeal and “can-do” optimism among U.S. officials in Saigon would brook no counsels of despair. Successive American presidents, committed to the domino theory and fearing the political consequences of “losing” Indochina, long refused to face the possibility that no amount of U.S. support would create a viable Southern government.¹¹

A rigorously formulated strategic basis for the agency’s programs, and for those of the U.S. government as a whole, could only have flowed from an explicit, systematically articulated understanding of the nature of the insurgency. Such an understanding would have taken into account the reciprocal relationships of interest and influence among the VC, the GVN, and the rural

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population. But no authoritative definition of the conflict ever emerged, in the agency or anywhere else in the U.S. government. Instead, in the early years the agency improvised its responses to local opportunities. Later, it restricted its focus to an intuitive, pragmatic refinement of established program content and project administration.¹²

Meanwhile, until the beginning of Vietnamization, the U.S. military favored large-unit engagements designed to inflict ultimately intolerable attrition on North Vietnamese and Viet Cong military forces. The other major U.S. player, USAID, adopted the economic model, and always counted on rural development to wilt the insurgent base. None of these approaches, however well funded and executed, directly confronted the sources of Viet Cong strength.¹³

The idea of taking the offensive by engaging the villagers in an expanding territorial defense, as embodied in the CIDG and Strategic Hamlet programs, represents the closest approach to a genuine pacification, as distinct from a war-fighting, strategy for Vietnam that CIA or any other U.S. agency ever adopted. But this concept was never definitively tested. COS John Richardson abandoned it when in 1962 he put CIDG at the service of tactical military operations, and the GVN's authoritarianism and incompetence prevented the Strategic Hamlet from becoming more than an empty facade. After the fall of the Diem government, the only serious application of the "oil-spot" principle came with the People's Action Team and its successor, the Rural Development Cadre program. But it, too, accepted—if only by default—the inviolability of the social and economic structures that had from the beginning helped fuel the insurgency.

Instead of a coherent strategy, agency managers pursued the limited goals that practical realities and their own proclivities recommended to them. For Diem-era case officers like Stuart Methven and Ralph Johnson, the very establishment of a GVN presence constituted a worthy goal, one that "made a difference." For Gil Layton and all those who worked with ethnic or religious minorities in CIDG and related programs, the objective was to enlist the villager in his own defense against the communists. Winning positive loyalty to the GVN was a secondary consideration, if it figured at all, for they assumed long-term American participation in the struggle.¹⁴

Other programs—notably Revolutionary Development—reflected the slightly schizoid inability to decide whether the goal was to protect the peasantry or to control it. Some pacification programs could serve both purposes, up to a point, for there could be no protection without a measure of control, and vice versa. But the question arose, once a physical barrier to VC incursions had been erected, whether the affected villagers now represented a poten-

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tial partner with the GVN or remained merely an object to be quarantined from renewed communist influence by means of forces introduced from the outside.

The question was never answered. The GVN was always more pessimistic than U.S. pacification managers about peasant loyalties, but even the most optimistic Americans were ambivalent. Policy statements usually asserted an intention to furnish protection and engage the voluntary cooperation of the peasantry. But with the fading of the cadre programs, pacification practice increasingly emphasized security operations that in effect treated villagers as complicit with the insurgents. By the time of the 1968 Tet offensive and the Accelerated Pacification Campaign, the agency's perception of an essentially political war had begun to fade, and CIA's managers in Vietnam made only fitful efforts to preserve the earlier emphasis on motivating the peasantry.

These managers had in any case always indulged a propensity to offer lofty rhetoric and material benefits as a substitute for concrete proposals for political reform. The deeply conservative cast of the GVN and U.S. dependence on that government as an anticommunist surrogate precluded the kinds of political and social reform that might have allowed a Southern regime to compete successfully with the Viet Cong. Field case officers sometimes recognized this dilemma, but senior managers and policy makers did not. Ostensibly political programs therefore largely bypassed such basic questions as power-sharing, social mobility, and distributive justice. Instead, they concentrated on "selling the GVN" (the conventional contemporary phrase, and a revealing one) to its rural constituency with propaganda and local services.

Even these palliatives had only a utilitarian purpose. Neither the CIA nor the U.S. Government as a whole ever treated political or social reforms in South Vietnam as ends in themselves. Such equities got attention only to the degree that they looked like useful tools in building resistance to the communists. To optimists like William Colby and Robert Komer, post-Tet attrition of the VC offered the hope that the GVN might win the countryside by a combination of force of arms and U.S.-supplied economic benefits. In such a scheme, active peasant allegiance to the GVN could be taken for granted or just ignored.¹⁵

The absence of a consistent motivational strategy had its counterpart in the programs aimed at suppressing the Viet Cong infrastructure. Indeed, for the first ten years of South Vietnam's existence, the United States played no significant operational role in the GVN effort to destroy the communist organization in the countryside. The Diem-era Combat Intelligence Teams linked to the "Fighting Fathers" and the paramilitary role of some Mountain Scout teams constituted only minor exceptions to CIA's detached posture. The station did

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not become deeply involved in attacking the VCI until 1964, when it adopted Census-Grievance, created the Counter-Terror program, and began sending intelligence advisers to Police Special Branch offices in the provinces.

CIA's commitment to the campaign against the VCI found its organizational expression in the District Intelligence and Operations Coordination Center, a device originated by the station and advised by U.S. military personnel. This commitment outlived the agency's interest in programs aimed at stimulating peasant support of the GVN. It is not difficult to see why: operations against the VCI had an unambiguous goal and produced quantifiable results. And the goal itself had the unanimous if not uniformly fervent approval of both the GVN and the various elements of the U.S. Mission in Saigon.¹⁶

After Tet 1968, as U.S. officials joined their GVN counterparts in relying on reduction of the VCI to pacify the countryside, the distinction between the two basic strategies, so important to earlier pacification managers, began to blur. The "search and destroy" strategy of regular U.S. and ARVN forces had always been one of attrition, one designed to reach a "crossover" point beyond which the communists could no longer replace all their losses, so that the military balance would shift in favor of the GVN. Now, as the "hearts and minds" approach withered, and General Abrams tried to substitute territorial defense for "search and destroy" operations, pacification, too, became a war of attrition, its outcome measured one "neutralization" at a time.

The emphasis on positive incentives, always greater on the U.S. side than on the GVN's, might have survived if the allies had adopted the communist practice of linking benefits to obligations. VC land reform, for example, awarded land to peasants only on condition that they become active participants in the revolution, sending their sons into the Viet Cong army and providing intelligence and material support to the local apparatus. GVN land reform, by contrast, when it finally took place in 1970, gave its beneficiaries unconditional ownership of their land. The peasant incurred no obligations to the GVN other than those specified in the terms of the transfer itself. It is probably at least partly for this reason that the GVN's distribution of some two and a half million acres after 1970 seems not to have generated any visible surge in peasant allegiance to the government.¹⁷

But U.S. and GVN pacification practice always assumed that the peasants' gratitude for material favors would make them willing to take risks on the government's behalf. A typical expression of this expectation came with a station proposal in 1968 to energize the RDC medics and integrate them into the GVN's regular public health program: "In Southeast Asia, a medical program, including strong emphasis on preventive medicine, is one of the most effective

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ways to ‘win the hearts and minds of the people.’” This echo of the Lansdale program in the Philippines also resonated with the casual benevolence of World War II GIs handing out fruit and chocolate to the children of defeated enemies. What it lacked was any evidence from experience in Vietnam that material largesse not linked to a coherent strategy affected in any significant way the choices that peasants made about which side to support.¹⁸

Trying to Measure Results

As with the progress of the shooting war, efforts to evaluate pacification results always stumbled over the absence of any agreed notion of what, in practical operational terms, might constitute victory. Assuming that it meant something less than total extermination of the GVN’s opponents, agency officers sought to define and measure trends in ways that permitted a reasonably credible projection of the outcome. CIA had originated all the national programs aimed exclusively at suppressing the VCI and all those (except for Strategic Hamlets and the so-called agrovilles) designed to build the GVN’s political presence in the countryside. But CIA never succeeded in formulating criteria capable of measuring qualitative changes in rural loyalties. Although the original Hamlet Evaluation System had some potential for qualitative measurement, in its application by CORDS management it came to imitate, in increasingly sterile fashion, the quantitative approach used to evaluate military operations.

The effects of this conceptual gap soon found their confusing way into the pacification nomenclature. Protection, for example, was always the watchword of pacification security operations, but measurements of program results came increasingly to be phrased in terms of control. The obvious fact that there could be no protection without a measure of control obscured the key issue of motivation. The CORDS Hamlet Evaluation System, with its conflation of security and control, in effect abdicated the whole question of peasant loyalties. With CIA and general U.S. withdrawal from pacification and the final militarization of the conflict with the 1972 Easter offensive, even the station lost interest in the question. The COS proclaimed that there was really nothing to measure; it was simply a question of who owned city hall, and the villagers’ “passive acceptance” of the GVN would suffice.¹⁹

Even during the years of its active involvement, while its own programs struggled to generate active peasant resistance to the VC, the station offered no corrective to the essentially quantitative standards employed by the rest of the U.S. Mission. It thus tacitly accepted a static criterion of physical control that

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bore little relationship either to the motivational purposes of its own action programs or to the actual extent of communist influence in the countryside. One effect of this was the illusion, common among U.S. officials, that freedom from attack or harassment justified rating a given hamlet as pacified. In fact, surface tranquility could hide covert VC influence and exploitation that met immediate communist needs even while a U.S. or GVN military presence kept enemy forces at bay.²⁰

Aside from these conceptual problems, public relations issues also tended to distort the evaluation process. Admirably candid if sometimes naive about the potential of its own programs in the early years, the station sometimes succumbed to later missionwide pressure to “get with the program.” The thrust to accentuate the positive probably represented a response to General Westmoreland’s January 1967 injunction to MACV to project a “favorable image” of the South Vietnamese forces providing area security for pacification. Intended to counter domestic U.S. opposition to a disproportionately large American combat role, this pressure to put the best foot forward encouraged similarly overoptimistic evaluation of the pacification programs.²¹

As a result of all this, there evolved a proclivity—noticeable, for example, in reporting from the agency-led Phung Hoang program—to interpret enemy resistance to a pacification initiative as proof that the program was succeeding and that the VC had finally lost the initiative. VC acknowledgment of a weakness or problem was often given the same interpretation, for willfully optimistic American officials had trouble seeing communist self-criticism the way the party did—that is, as an institutionalized tool of revolutionary management.

There was also the matter of perspective. Both the GVN and the VC labored under such gigantic handicaps that any assessment focusing on one or the other was likely to conclude that it had found the probable loser. And most assessments did just that. Case officers trying to run motivational programs with inept GVN officials would despair of the outcome even while officers looking at VC infrastructure losses could see communist defeat as only a matter of time. The failure to identify what is now dubbed the “center of gravity,” that is, the goal whose achievement would in fact constitute victory, deprived U.S. and GVN officials of a valid measure of pacification success.

Toward the end, success came to mean nothing more than staving off defeat, frustrating Hanoi’s ambition to annex the South without requiring the GVN to seize either the political or the military initiative. The question of how best to measure pacification results had at that point become moot.

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The Style and Substance of the CIA Approach to Counterinsurgency

Like all the other participants in the pacification programs in South Vietnam, the agency lacked a consistent strategy to guide its efforts. Nevertheless, its performance in South Vietnam displayed unique features that distinguished its approach from those favored by the GVN and other U.S. agencies. The most important of these was the engagement of villagers, not just in their own defense or as informants, but as leadership cadres committed to the GVN and to the extension of its authority in the countryside. Where local GVN leadership exploited and supported such peasant-based cadres, substantial if often transitory success followed. One may infer from this that by more consistent and more energetic use of the motivational programs—especially the RD Cadre—the GVN might have contested with the communists for peasant loyalty on something like an even basis. But this would have risked creating a politically active peasantry, a new class perhaps impatient with the soldiers who occupied every GVN position of real political authority down to the district level. No Saigon government, military or even civilian, ever contemplated creating such a prospect.

A second characteristic feature of the agency's pacification efforts was the performance of its flexible, highly responsive logistic system. It satisfied, without any evident strain, the financial and materiel requirements of such varied programs as the Force Populaire, the montagnard CIDG, People's Action Teams, and Provincial Reconnaissance. Unfortunately for the chances of having any major influence on the course of the war, this flexibility derived partly from the agency's modest size. The limited capacity of the logistic system meant that expanding the program to a potentially decisive scale required its transfer to a larger but more conventionally structured agency like the Defense Department or USAID.

The resulting dilemma could not be solved. The CIA system could not be expanded enough to handle the larger programs, and a combination of institutional practice and legal constraints in Defense and USAID precluded their acquiring the needed flexibility. Meanwhile, the GVN was supposed to participate in managing pacification logistics in order to prepare itself to run the programs alone. But this long-term imperative always collided with the GVN's limited competence, which often rendered its participation as much a hindrance as a help.

Another aspect of the agency's performance is to be found in its managerial style. Like the logistic system, this style had both good and bad implications for the success of the programs. On the plus side, the absence of any formal

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CIA—or U.S.—pacification doctrine fed the proclivity, common among agency operations managers, to allow the working level to propose and implement its own activities. This practice freed field case officers to shape their activities in extemporaneous, pragmatic ways, exploiting local opportunities and responding to local conditions. Except for the Ngo brothers' Strategic Hamlets and station intelligence collection against the VC infrastructure, every one of the pacification activities sponsored or supported by the agency began as a local initiative. The very ability to respond to such opportunities must be seen as a major factor in the evolution of a leading station role in pacification, and in its real, if limited and transitory, successes.

But many of the CIA's province case officers who staffed the programs in their early "franchise" mode were serving their first tour abroad, and practically none came with any experience in rural political or security operations. Decentralized authority therefore relied for its success not so much on these officers' substantive expertise as on their energy and practical judgment. These prerequisites might be met while the small programs of the early years were staffed by the well-motivated products of a rigorous hiring process and training regime. But the expansion of these modest efforts into nationwide programs required more people than the Clandestine Service could supply. The imposition of compulsory service on CIA staff officers was accompanied by the hiring of numerous contractors. Many of the contractors had at best uneven professional qualifications, while the "draft" tended to dampen the morale of all but the most highly motivated among the staff officers sent to Vietnam. The inevitable result was a less engaged and competent American advisory group supporting a larger and more bureaucratized program.

Perhaps the single weakest aspect of agency pacification work in Vietnam was precisely the one in which the agency took the most pride. Bill Colby's perennial celebration of CIA political action expertise is echoed in operational correspondence by recurring references to the agency's unique capabilities in this field. But in fact, the station's contribution to political action in Vietnam hardly ever transcended the organizational and the logistic. CIA furnished money, materiel, and technical support while leaving ideological content to its sundry Vietnamese collaborators. Not a bad approach, to the extent that these collaborators had workable ideas of their own, it nevertheless perpetuated the incoherent agency (and U.S. government) approach to the political aspect of the conflict. The GVN must be invigorated and reformed, and the peasantry must be won over to the government side, but all of this must be done without disturbing the political, social, and economic structure bequeathed by the French colonial regime.

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More generally, agency officers shared the universal American confidence in the application of massive material resources and of superior American management techniques. That both of these might be irrelevant to the outcome in Vietnam was not a thought readily entertained by CIA or any other U.S. officials.

An Early Decision

In a sense, the issue in South Vietnam was decided in the early months of the Diem regime. The early CIA effort to encourage and help the Ngo brothers mobilize the countryside using urban-bred cadres in an organization developed from the top down soon came to nothing. By 1955, Diem had decided—or succumbed to a compulsion—to take peasant loyalty for granted while he tried to extirpate former Viet Minh adherents and sympathizers who did not actively embrace his regime. In so doing, he set the terms of the struggle for the South Vietnamese countryside. His 1956 evisceration of village government, undertaken despite the interest he shared with local authorities in preserving the social and economic status quo, betrayed his own sense of weakness. Whatever the villagers' initial disposition to give the Diem regime a chance—the evidence on this is too fragmentary for a confident judgment—when the communists turned to “armed struggle” in late 1959, peasant alienation from the GVN had reached flash point. In a countryside that CIA thought in 1957 belonged to the GVN, the insurgents soon either controlled or contested everything except cities and towns, garrisons, and main lines of communication.²²

The hollow Strategic Hamlet program did little to reverse the tide. But its failure emerged only after Buddhist self-immolations persuaded Washington that Ngo Dinh Diem was not indispensable—was in fact a positive obstacle—to the survival of a noncommunist nation in the South.

Diem's legacy to the generals who succeeded him was a body politic that celebrated his departure but waited for the new regime to prove its claim to the active peasant loyalty that Diem had never solicited. Yet although the United States and the new GVN now had an opportunity to reevaluate the insurgency to determine whether and how the countryside might be reclaimed, no such evaluation ever took place. The Americans, including CIA's managers, and the South Vietnamese attributed communist gains to the Ngo brothers' personal weaknesses and tactical and administrative failures. Accordingly, the effort to capitalize on the fall of the old regime in a renewed contest with the Viet Cong proceeded from the same faulty assumptions that had driven earlier programs. Honest if paternalistic government, physical security, and economic improve-

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ment would immunize the peasant against subversion and coercion. And a well-intentioned, energetic group of generals could succeed where Diem had failed.

Early hopes for the junta proved to be just as flawed as the prescription for dealing with the peasantry. The generals' narrow, class-based outlook and the interests they shared with their urban constituency compelled them to imitate, if with less arbitrary cruelty, the approach taken by their predecessor. Always paternalistic, the GVN under the generals never approached the levels of honesty and competence required to establish its claim even to unquestioned authority, let alone to active peasant loyalty.

As for physical security, any improvement required both an active commitment from ARVN commanders at all echelons and a peasant militia capable of resisting VC infiltration and minor armed incursions. As it turned out, the generals failed on both counts. ARVN avoided the small-unit night operations that would have impeded communist mobility and access to the civilian population. And the generals harbored too much suspicion of peasant loyalties to arm a nationwide militia before the communists' regular forces consolidated their access to peasant support.

The superiority of the communists' organization in the countryside did not imply a spontaneous rural consensus in their favor. Many peasants hated them, and disaffection grew after 1964 as a militarized contest forced the VC and the North Vietnamese into increasingly harsh exactions. In these circumstances, a Saigon government transformed after Diem's fall into a model of egalitarian activism and making exemplary use of American resources might have competed for rural allegiance. But Saigon's generals were, as a group, no more politically adept than most military juntas, and their civilian bureaucracy clung to the patronizing colonial style inherited from the French. Moreover, since the communists had largely absorbed the political talent in the peasantry during the struggle against the French and then against the Diem regime, even an enlightened ARVN leadership would have had dangerously little to work with.

In fact, the generals proved enlightened enough to acquiesce after 1965 in the establishment of the national pacification programs. But the very need for U.S. persuasion to get the GVN involved meant that they gave the effort only a qualified commitment. As a result, the programs never acquired the institutional base in the GVN that would have allowed them to survive the withdrawal of U.S. material support and operating guidance. In practice, the generals held at arm's length not only the peasantry but their own peasant-based pacification cadres, treating them just as another instrument of bureau-

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cratic control. Beginning in 1969, Vietnamization forced the GVN into broad land reform and a greatly expanded militia, but these initiatives were followed by regressive practices like manipulating the selection of candidates for local office, followed by the suspension of hamlet elections in 1972.²³

Whether led by Ngo Dinh Diem or by the generals, the Saigon government never sought to mobilize the countryside, but only to preserve the social and economic status quo. To be sure, the means of protecting the old order—village self-defense, improvements in agriculture, and eradication of the VC infrastructure—overlapped with those of a more radical program that might have aimed at giving the peasantry a real stake in the GVN's survival. But the programs as carried out could not and did not win the political initiative for the Saigon government.

Lyndon Johnson's withdrawal from the 1968 presidential race, prompted by the Tet offensive, signaled the end of the U.S. commitment to create a Saigon regime fully sovereign over its own territory. As both Saigon and Washington became increasingly absorbed in trying to save what could be saved, the earlier focus on inspiring peasant loyalty gradually gave way to a renewed emphasis on repression of the VC organization. A late spasm of violence, the Accelerated Pacification Campaign, resembled the Diem effort of the late 1950s and had the similar result of gravely weakening communist hamlet- and village-level organization. Also like the Diem campaign, it left the GVN still on the political defensive in the countryside, and the surviving VC organization continued to exploit the peasantry for intelligence and material support. With the countryside still uncommitted to the GVN, the contest proceeded to its military conclusion.

In the light of subsequent events, it is clear that by 1965 it was already too late for the GVN to engage its own population in successful opposition to the communists. The insurgency had triumphed, and it remained only for the VC main forces and newly arrived formations from the North to finish off a dispirited ARVN and occupy the cities and towns. Massive U.S. military intervention merely delayed the outcome, as military government displayed the fatal weaknesses that later prompted Robert Komer to compare it to Chiang Kai-shek's decayed Kuomintang.²⁴

Of all the U.S. government organs associated with rural pacification in South Vietnam, only CIA played a continual part from the effort's inception in 1954 to its demise in 1972. The record of this experience documents both the conduct of the station's own programs and periodic wider efforts by CIA to assess trends and to project outcomes. The programs were economically and pragmatically run, and the assessments honestly if sometimes naively drawn.

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Both were flawed by misunderstanding of the nature of the challenge, and by the prevailing, if ultimately receding, confidence in the transformative power of American material resources and managerial techniques. It is clear now, although then obscured by American ideological preconceptions, transitory GVN successes, and the communists' own weaknesses, that the Viet Cong succeeded by exploiting the social and economic legacy of the colonial period. Only a collapse of communist will to win could have altered the outcome, and that will never faltered. The North Vietnamese tanks rolling into Saigon on 30 April 1975 sealed a victory that the Southern insurgents had won more than a decade before.

Notes

All archival sources not otherwise attributed are from the CIA Archives and Records Center.

Introduction

1. This summary is drawn from Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Penguin, 1984), chaps. 4–5. The term *Viet Minh* is an abbreviation of Vietnam Doc Lap Dong Minh (Vietnam Independence League). The other two, far less populous, countries in French Indochina were Laos and Cambodia.

1. “The Effort Must Be Made”

1. The given name Dung is pronounced, approximately, “Zoong.” Diem is “Zeeyem” and Nhu “Nyoo.” Thuc is pronounced “Took.”

2. Paul Harwood, interview report DR-169, 19 June 1964, files of the East Asia Division, National Clandestine Service. This is one of a series of interviews of officers who had served in Vietnam conducted on behalf of the Operations Directorate. Dung’s reference to an armed and hostile population presumably pertained to the anticommunist religious sects the Hoa Hao and the Cao Dai as well as to the Viet Minh.

3. SAIG 3407, 26 July 1954, job 78-2412R, box 4, folder 2.

4. Hoang Van Thai and Tran Van Quang, eds., *History of the People’s Army of Vietnam*, vol. 2, trans. Merle Pribbenow (Hanoi: Vietnam Military History Institute, Ministry of Defense, 1994), 27–30.

5. Quoted in U.S. Department of Defense, *Pentagon Papers*, Gravel ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 1:308.

6. John Caswell, interview by the author, 4 January 1991, Washington, DC.

7. Thomas L. Ahern Jr., *CIA and the House of Ngo* (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2000), chaps. 2–3.

8. U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955–1957*, vol. 1, *Vietnam* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1985), 611–14; Ahern, *CIA and the House of Ngo*, chaps. 5, 7. The best account known to me of the Diem government’s early strategy against the Viet Minh and its treat-

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ment of the peasantry is Jeffrey Race, *War Comes to Long An* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972).

9. Ahern, *CIA and the House of Ngo*, chap. 7.

10. For a chronology of Lansdale's assignments, see Cecil B. Currey, *Edward Lansdale, the Unquiet American* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1988). Currey's credulity regarding many of the claims for and by Lansdale makes the book unreliable.

11. Ahern, *CIA and the House of Ngo*, chaps. 2–3.

12. Evan J. Parker Jr., Chief, FE/4, Directorate of Plans, memorandum for the record, "Indochina Positioning of CIA PW [Psychological Warfare] Officer," 15 March 1954, job 1927R, box 3, folder 6; Edward G. Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), 157–59; SAIG 3336, 12 July 1954, job 78-1927R, box 1, folder 1.

13. History of the Lansdale mission [description redacted].

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid.

17. Paul Harwood, interview by the author, 16 May 1990, McLean, VA.

18. SAIG 3956, 17 September 1954, job 78-1927R, box 1, folder 4; Paul Harwood, interviews by the author, 14 August 1990 and 17 October 1989, McLean, VA.

19. History of the Lansdale mission.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid. Several of Lansdale's officers were preparing staybehind operations for North Vietnam, where there was a Western presence in Hanoi until May 1955.

23. Ibid.; David Smith, telephone interview by the author, 19 August 1995.

24. U.S. Department of Defense, *Pentagon Papers*, 1:306–7.

25. Ibid. The term *cadre* has various connotations, depending on context. In U.S. and GVN usage, it referred to any communist functionary, military or civilian, with significant supervisory responsibility or discretionary authority. In this scheme, a guerrilla squad leader or a hamlet committee member would qualify. The term was used also for more senior people, up to at least the provincial level. With respect to GVN personnel, the term was even more inclusive, applying to any member of a rural pacification program who had a substantive function. The term has this range of application throughout this volume.

26. History of the Lansdale mission.

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid.

29. Ibid. USIS is the term applied to overseas representations of the U.S. Information Agency. Also see Smith telephone interview, 19 August 1995.

30. History of the Lansdale mission.

31. Ibid. Lansdale's first annual report and *In the Midst of Wars* are replete with his exhortations on leadership delivered to Diem during the first months of their association.

32. Ibid.; Rufus Phillips, interview by the author, 11 October 1989, McLean, VA.

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33. Phillips interview, 11 October 1989; history of the Lansdale mission.
34. For an account of this episode, and the CIA role therein, see Ahern, *CIA and the House of Ngo*, chaps. 5–6.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid., chap. 6.
37. Phillips interview, 11 October 1989.
38. Ibid. SMM observers were not the only ones to see the weakness of Diem's hold on the rural population. After a May 1955 field trip, land reform adviser Wolf Ladejinsky reported on "the absence of political, administrative, and military backing [for Diem] throughout [the] countryside. . . . Free Vietnam is more an expression of desire than . . . a fact." (See memorandum, Mr. Young to Mr. Robertson, "CIA Message to Saigon on Diem's Policies," 1 June 1955, 751 G. 00/6-155, RG 59, National Archives and Records Administration, Suitland, MD; hereafter cited as NARA.)
39. History of the Lansdale mission.
40. Ibid.
41. Ibid.; U.S. Department of Defense, *Pentagon Papers*, 2:306–7.
42. History of the Lansdale mission; Phillips interview, 11 October 1989.
43. DIR 09376, 17 June 1955, and SAIG 7370, 22 June 1955, both job 78-2412R, box 4, folder 2; Laurent St. George, telephone interview by the author, 25 August 1995.
44. History of the Lansdale mission.
45. Ibid.
46. FVSW 1106, 21 July 1955, 78-1053R, box 2, folder 1.
47. FVSA 1542, 5 September 1955, 78-1184R, box 10, folder 8; Paul Harwood, interview by the author, 11 September 1990, McLean, VA. Harwood left Vietnam in the spring of 1956.

2. "Get Them before They Get Us"

1. Document, 28 July 1955 [repository redacted]; Paul Harwood, interview by the author, 21 June 1990, McLean, VA.
2. Document, 28 July 1955; Harwood interview, 21 June 1990.
3. Paul Harwood, interview by the author, 27 March 1991, McLean, VA; U.S. Department of Defense, *Pentagon Papers*, 1:311.
4. SAIG 9153, 9 November 1955, 78-1184R, box 10, folder 9.
5. U.S. Department of Defense, *Pentagon Papers*, 1:311. In a broadcast in late 1955, Hanoi attributed the campaign to Lansdale, and described it as an adaptation of American techniques used in Kuomintang China and in the Philippines. Lansdale did, in fact, celebrate the lethal tricks used against the Huk rebels, but in Vietnam he acted as the leading exponent of what came to be known as "hearts and minds." (See Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS), Indochina: Communist, 29 November 1955.) With respect to the size of the Viet Minh staybehind apparatus, see Thai and Quang, *People's Army*, 65, which claims that in 1955,

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“many provinces in South Vietnam still had several thousand cadre and party members, and every village had a party chapter.”

6. SAIG 0275, 19 February 1956, job 78-1927R, box 3, folder 3; Douglas Blaufarb, interview by the author, 11 April 1991, Lewes, WV; Phillips interview, 11 October 1989. Blaufarb was deputy chief of station for two years beginning in the spring of 1956. The editors of *People's Army*, Thai and Quang, view the early anti-Viet Minh programs of the Diem government as two separate campaigns, one of “communist denunciation” and the other of “communist elimination” (see 62–69).

7. Memorandum, 26 April 1956, job 78-1927R, box 3.

8. Putney Westerfield, memorandum, “Field Trip to Vinh Long, 27–28 June 1956,” job 78-1184R, box 10, folder 10. The term *Viet Cong*, meaning Vietnamese communist and pejorative in tone, was coined by officials of the Government of the Republic of [South] Vietnam. Beginning in the 1950s, it gradually replaced “Viet Minh” as the accepted GVN and U.S. label for the Southern insurgents. The term *pacification* derives from French usage applied during the Moroccan campaign of the early twentieth century. Having largely replaced the term *counterinsurgency* in the mid-1960s, it went in and out of fashion with U.S. officials: out because of the connotation of harsh repression associated with the French, and in because no one ever found a more satisfactory term. I use it, as the agency generally if unofficially came to use it, to mean the combination of positive and negative incentives employed to generate and reward the loyalty of the peasants and to deter or punish those who conducted or supported the insurgency.

9. Putney Westerfield, memorandum, “Field Trip to Can Tho, 28 June 1956,” job 78-1184R, box 10, folder 10.

10. Putney Westerfield, memorandum for the record, “Conversation with Binh Thuan (Phan Thiet) Province Chief Giai,” c. May 1956, attachment to FVSA 3088, n.d., job 78-1359R, box 6, folder 11.

11. Westerfield memorandum, c. May 1956.

12. SAIG 0456, 4 March 1956, job 78-1184, box 10, folder 10.

13. Attachment to FVSA 3453, n.d.

14. John Caswell, interview by the author, 27 March 1991, Washington, DC; Chester L. Cooper et al., *The American Experience with Pacification in Vietnam: An Overview* (Arlington, VA: Institute for Defense Analyses, 1972), 3:119–20, quoted in Eric M. Bergerud, *The Dynamics of Defeat: The Vietnam War In Hau Nghia Province* (Boulder: Westview, 1991), 14.

15. John C. Donnell, *Viet Cong Recruitment: Why and How Men Join* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 1967), 65–70.

16. Paul Harwood, interview by the author, 27 December 1990, McLean, VA.

17. Race, *War Comes to Long An*, 20; Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars*, 356; R. Michael Pearce, *The Insurgent Environment* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 1969), 18, 26–27; U.S. Department of Defense, *Pentagon Papers*, 1:310. The South Vietnamese province and district are analogous to the American state

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and county, with the major difference that GVN officials at both levels were all appointed by the central government.

18. SAIG 9821, 14 January 1956, DIR 43565, 19 January 1956, and DIR 45658, 1 February 1956, all job 78-1927R, box 3, folder 10.

19. Thai and Quang, *People's Army*, 62–64. The Politburo Resolution is 64-N, 19 June 1956, file no. 7,928.

20. George Allen, interview by the author, 9 March 1995, Arlington, VA. Later a senior CIA analyst, Allen then covered South Vietnam for U.S. Army intelligence. Also see Harwood interview, 27 December 1990.

21. U.S. Department of Defense, *Pentagon Papers*, 1:308–9, 314. Cung died in 1957, at which point “Nhu absorbed the remnants [of Cung’s civic action program] into his organization,” presumably the NRM. Whether Cung, originally a proponent of the political-psychological approach favored by Lansdale, had authored or concurred in the subordination of civic action to the denunciation campaign is unknown.

22. History of the Lansdale mission.

23. Ibid.

24. [Document description redacted.]

25. Ibid.

26. Nicholas Natsios, interview by the author, 6 May 1991, Lowell, MA; Douglas Blaufarb, interview by the author, 16 November 1989, Lewes, WV. Natsios was chief of station in Saigon from 1957 to 1960.

27. Caswell interview, 4 January 1991; Evan J. Parker Jr., interview by the author, 8 March 1991, Potomac, MD.

28. Memorandum to the DCI, “Meeting with President Ngo Dinh Diem,” 3 May 1957, Ngo Dinh Diem dossier.

29. Job 78-2331R, box 1, folder 6; memorandum of conversation, “General Discussion of Situation in North Vietnam by President Ngo Dinh Diem,” Records Group 59, 751 G. 11/5-957, NARA; chief, Far East Division, cover note on memorandum to the DCI, “Visit to Washington of Ngo Dinh Diem,” 22 March 1957, Ngo Dinh Nhu dossier; Caswell interview, 27 March 1991.

30. Thai and Quang, *People's Army*, 70. For more extended treatment of “extermination of traitors,” see Race, *War Comes to Long An*, 82–84.

31. Blaufarb interview, 16 November 1989.

32. Nicholas Natsios, interview by the author, 6 March 1991, Lowell, MA; Blaufarb interview, 11 April 1991. Blaufarb said he once heard Nhu criticize the European fascists’ stupidity in having proclaimed in advance their aggressive aims (Blaufarb interview, 16 November 1989).

33. Natsios interview, 6 March 1991; Embassy Saigon dispatch 191, 5 December 1957; U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1955–57*, vol. 1, *Vietnam*, 869–84. The Vietnam Quoc Dan Dang arose before World War II as a nationalist party supported by Chiang Kai-shek’s Kuomintang. Its principal competitor among the secular parties was the Dai Viet Party, also divided into two wings, the Northern and the Southern.

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34. Thai and Quang, *People's Army*, 62–69; Saigon Embassy dispatch 76, 2 September 1958, RG 59, 751 G, 00/9-258, NARA.

35. U.S. Department of Defense, *Pentagon Papers*, 1:312–13, 308–9.

36. FVSA 7166, 11 February 1958, job 78-1053R, box 2, folder 4. The station's NRM contact is not to be confused with Nguyen Van Thieu, the ARVN general who later became president of South Vietnam.

37. *Ibid.*

38. Douglas Blaufarb, memorandum for the record, 13 January 1958, attachment to FVSA 8445, 22 August 1958, job 78-1239R, box 1, folder 11; U.S. Department of Defense, *Pentagon Papers*, 1:311–12. The NRM seems not to have been so inert, at least in the imagination of the An Giang Province information officer: a five-week denunciation campaign it conducted there “resulted in the surrender of 8,125 communist agents, and the denunciation of 9,806 other agents and 29,978 sympathizers” (see U.S. Department of Defense, *Pentagon Papers*, 1:311).

39. Douglas Blaufarb, memorandum for the record, 3 June 1966, possibly an attachment to FVSA 8445, job 78-1239R, box 1, folder 11.

40. Thai and Quang, *People's Army*, 65.

41. FVS 3283, 13 May 1959, and SAIG 9166, 28 June 1959. The perennial theme of a shortage of effective officials surfaced again at this time, when Nhu told Colby that “no one . . . is more conscious of the weakness of its cadres and the difficulty of securing good leadership than the Government itself” (FVS 3418, 24 June 1959, job 78-1239R, box 1, folder 12).

42. Ronald H. Spector, *Advice and Support: The Early Years: The U.S. Army in Vietnam* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 1985), 332; Thai and Quang, *People's Army*, 71–72.

43. Thai and Quang, *People's Army*, 70; William Colby, *Lost Victory* (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1989), 55.

44. Spector, *The Early Years*, 330–32.

45. *Ibid.*, 334–36.

46. *Ibid.*, 322–33.

47. The best source, in English at least, on Vietnamese peasant responses to the competing pressures applied by the VC and the GVN remains the Rand Corporation series of studies conducted in the mid- to late 1960s. In the present context, see especially two memoranda: Donnell, *Viet Cong Recruitment*; and W. P. Davison and J. J. Zasloff, *A Profile of Viet Cong Cadres* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 1966). See also Spector, *The Early Years*, 336–37.

48. Spector, *The Early Years*, 338.

49. Race, *War Comes to Long An*, 113–15. By Tet 1960, 90 of 117 hamlet chiefs in Can Duoc District of Long An Province had already resigned, and by the end of 1960 only 6 of the remaining 27 were still on duty.

50. Spector, *The Early Years*, 338–43, 349–51. All of Spector's examples of ARVN defeats during this period, except for the Trang Sup attack, are drawn from declassified CIA reporting.

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51. *Ibid.*, 346–47.

52. *Ibid.*

53. Allen interview, 9 March 1995.

54. *Ibid.* As it happened, station reporting did warn of a major attack in Tay Ninh in January 1960. COS Nick Natsios, anticipating a characteristic Williams complaint about CIA intelligence support, had with him the reading folder containing that reporting when Williams accused the station during a Country Team meeting of an intelligence failure. Natsios responded by displaying the folder, whose routing slip bore Williams's initials (Natsios interview, 6 March 1991).

55. Natsios interview, 6 March 1991. Vietnamese are addressed by the last name in sequence, which is the given name. Tran Van Minh's American contacts therefore referred to him as "Little Minh" to distinguish him from the more senior and physically more imposing Duong Van Minh.

56. *Ibid.*

57. George McT. Kahin, *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam* (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1997), 123.

58. George A. Carver, interview by the author, 23 October 1991, Washington, DC.

59. *Ibid.*; Thai and Quang, *People's Army*, 91–95.

3. Counterinsurgency in the Central Highlands

1. George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950–1975*, 2nd ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986), 75–77.

2. *Ibid.*, 77; Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Penguin, 1984), 248.

3. Herring, *America's Longest War*, 80–81.

4. Blind memorandum, "Chronology of CIA Involvement in Vietnam Paramilitary Programs," 2 June 1975, job 81-336R, box 6. This document says that the DCI approved the "establishment of intel, psywar, political action and paramilitary nets in the central highlands provinces of Vietnam employing Montagnards with the objectives of gaining village support in identifying VC agents and activities and neutralizing them."

5. DIR 34771, 11 January 1962, job 91-270R, box 1, folder 15; unsigned memorandum for the record, "CFE Discussion of His Conversation with Secretary of Defense McNamara," 24 May 1962, job 72-233R, box 1, folder 4.

6. Kahin, *Intervention*, 139–43; Colby, *Lost Victory*, chap. 6; blind memorandum, "Paramilitary Groups in Vietnam (Definitions)," "as of 1 March 1963," job 72-233R, box 5, folder 19; Hue dispatch 461, 11 November 1962, job 72-233R, box 3, folder 11; job 72-233R, box 1, folder 6.

7. Embassy Saigon dispatch 276, 4 January 1961, job 65-732R, box 1, folder 11. The Country Team later came to be called the U.S. Mission Council.

8. *Ibid.* Durbrow, to be sure, had as early as September 1960 advocated GVN reforms, although even these were cast almost exclusively in terms of economic benefits such as raising the price of rice and increasing material aid to agrovilles

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inhabitants. William Colby acknowledges weaknesses in the plan and in the station's contribution to it in *Lost Victory*, 95–96.

9. Embassy Saigon dispatch 276; Colby, *Lost Victory*, 83.

10. Embassy Saigon dispatch 276.

11. Herring, *America's Longest War*, 75–77; U.S. Department of Defense, *Pentagon Papers*, 2:6–7, 30–31, 50–54.

12. Colby, *Lost Victory*, 34, 88–89.

13. Richard D. Burke et al., *U.S. Army Special Forces Operations under the Civilian Irregular Defense Groups Program in Vietnam, 1961–64* (McLean, VA: Research Analysis Corporation, 1966), chap. 3. Not only GVN officials but all Americans in Vietnam, whether or not they spoke French, applied the French term *montagnard*—roughly, “mountain dweller”—generically to the non-Vietnamese peoples of the Annamite highlands. Among themselves, the majority Vietnamese often referred to them with the contemptuous *moi*, i.e., “savages.”

14. *Ibid.* The figure of 180,000 settlers is from William Colby, “History of CIA Ops, USAID GVN [*sic*] Cadre Programs Pre and Post 1963,” n.d., transcript of lecture, job 71-797R, box 1.

15. Gilbert Layton, interview by the author, 3 January 1995, Fairfax, VA. The cover name of the MOS was the Combined Studies Division, part of MAAG until the creation in 1962 of the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV). Layton headed the MOS from March 1960 to January 1964.

16. Layton interview, 3 January 1995.

17. Unsigned blind memorandum, probably by Gilbert Layton, “Montagnard Plan,” 5 May 1961, job 72-233R, box 5, folder 23. Rhadé is pronounced Rah-DAY.

18. *Ibid.*; Gilbert Layton, memorandum to Robert G. Caldwell, “Rhadé Program in Ban Me Thuot Area,” 18 May 1961, job 72-233R, box 5, folder 23.

19. Colby, “History of CIA Ops.”

20. Layton interview, 3 January 1995; H. Francis Cunningham, memorandum to William Colby, “Your Draft Highlander Program Dated June 28,” n.d., job 72-233R, box 5, folder 23.

21. William Colby, telephone interview by the author, 2 June 1995.

22. Sergeant First Class Paul Campbell, memorandum to chief, Combined Studies Division, “Detailed Report of Medical Activities from July 1961 through November 1962,” 16 January 1964, job 72-233R, box 5, folder 19.

23. *Ibid.* An approximate pronunciation of Buon Enao is Boon-ee-NOW.

24. *Ibid.*; FVSA 13054, 9 December 1961, job 72-233R, box 5, folder 24.

25. Campbell, “Report.”

26. *Ibid.*; FVSA 13054.

27. FVSA 13054.

28. Campbell, “Report”; John A. McCone, memorandum, “History and Development of the Buon Enao Project,” 28 August 1962, job 72-233R, box 5.

29. Campbell, “Report.”

30. *Ibid.*

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31. Layton interview, 3 January 1995; blind memorandum, “Chronology of CIA Involvement in Paramilitary Programs”; McCone, “History and Development of the Buon Enao Project.”

32. FVSA 16980, 13 January 1964, job 72-233R, box 5, folder 24.

33. Ibid.

34. Colby, *Lost Victory*, 91.

35. Layton interview, 3 January 1995.

36. Ibid.

37. Ibid.

38. McCone, “History and Development of the Buon Enao Project”; SAIG 8151, 21 March 1962, job 91-270R, box 1, folder 15.

39. McCone, “History and Development of the Buon Enao Project”; draft report, job 72-233R, box 5, folder 23. When dealing with montagnard communities, the station’s correspondence seldom refers to the hamlet, the smallest administrative unit in South Vietnam. In this context, hamlet and village seem to be synonymous, whereas in lowland communities the village contains two or more hamlets.

40. Draft report.

41. Campbell, “Report”; draft report.

42. Draft report.

43. Ibid.; Layton interview, 3 January 1995.

44. Campbell, “Report.”

45. FVSA 16980, 13 January 1964, job 72-233R, box 5, folder 24.

46. Ibid.

47. Ibid.; Layton interview, 3 January 1995.

48. Layton interview, 3 January 1995.

49. Ibid.

50. Ibid.

51. Campbell, “Report”; FVSA 14579, 14 November 1962, job 91-270R, box 1, folder 16; FVSA 16980.

52. FVSA 16980.

53. Ibid.; Layton interview, 3 January 1995.

54. McCone, “History and Development of the Buon Enao Project.”

55. Ibid.

56. Ibid.

57. FVSA 16980.

58. Major Donn Fendler, report, c. May 1962, job 233R, box 5, folder 19.

59. Ibid.

60. FVSA 16980.

61. FVSA 13879, 28 June 1962; FVSA 13943, 16 July 1962.

62. Memorandum for the record, “Meeting with Counsellor Ngo Dinh Nhu on 23 August 1962,” 30 August 1962, attachment to FVST 4002.

63. Ibid.

64. Memorandum to the Office of the Special Assistant, “Tour for Highlander Village Chiefs,” 7 March 1963, job 72-233R, box 5, folder 11; FVSA 16980.

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65. “Tour for Highlander Village Chiefs”; FVSA 16980.

66. Blind memorandum, “Civilian Irregular Defense Groups,” 13 November 1963, job 72-233R, box 5, folder 14; SAIG 6355, 30 March 1963, job 436R, box 1, folder 9. Surviving summaries of project activity do not, oddly, quantify later CIDG accomplishments in terms of population or area control. These presumably grew in rough proportion to the number of armed defenders. Regarding the number of men under arms, the term CIDG came to be applied, during the course of 1962, to all village defense programs, including the Sea Swallows and the Combat Youth. The figure 38,500 presumably includes these men, although the record does not make this explicit.

67. James Mullen, memorandum to chief of station, “The Montagnard Problem,” 13 April 1961, job 72-233R, box 5, folder 5. No security classification indicated. This folder contains a copy of Hung’s document. To say that Can was reclusive is perhaps to understate the point. In his two years in Hue, Mullen once had a meeting with Ngo Dinh Diem but never saw Can. When COS Colby visited, he and Mullen left their business cards at Can’s villa, and Mullen’s regular contact in Can’s entourage later rebuked him for their temerity in going directly to the house, rather than sending their cards through a flunky (James Mullen, telephone interview by the author, 6 January 1995).

68. Hung document.

69. *Ibid.*

70. Mullen, “The Montagnard Problem,” comments on transmittal sheet.

71. *Ibid.*; Ralph Johnson, memorandum of conversation with Captain Ngo Van Hung, 4 October 1961, job 72-233R, box 5, folder 5 (hereafter cited as Johnson, Hung memo); Ralph Johnson, memorandum, “History of the Mountain Scout Program, October 1961–28 February 1962,” n.d., job 72-233R, box 5, folder 4. This memorandum says that participants in the program were originally called “mountain commandos.” The term *mountain scout* was adopted at some later point; the change may have accompanied the addition of the civic action/psywar element. With respect to MAAG involvement, it is not clear why the station did not make use of Layton’s Military Operations Section to handle this liaison; one factor may have been competition between MOS and the Political Operations Section (later the Political Action Section) in which Johnson worked.

72. Johnson, Hung memo; Johnson, “Mountain Scout Program.”

73. Johnson, Hung memo; Johnson, “Mountain Scout Program.”

74. Johnson, “Mountain Scout Program”; FVSA 13043, 7 December 1961, job 72-233R, box 5, folder 5.

75. Johnson, “Mountain Scout Program.”

76. *Ibid.*

77. *Ibid.*

78. *Ibid.*

79. *Ibid.*

80. FVSA 13043, 7 December 1961, and FVSA 13702, 18 May 1962, both job 72-233R, box 5, folder 5.

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81. FVSA 14579; Stuart Methven, interview by the author, 17 June 1995, Clinton, VA.
82. Methven interview, 17 June 1995. The interview was based on Methven's written responses, in May 1995, to a set of questions from the interviewer. Material from both sources is cited as the Methven interview.
83. *Ibid.*
84. *Ibid.*
85. FVSA 14579.
86. Methven interview, 17 June 1995.
87. *Ibid.*; FVSA 14579; Blind memorandum, "Mountain Scout/Paramilitary Political Action Program," "as of 1 May 1963," job 72-233R, box 5, folder 24.
88. FVSA 16980, c. 13 January 1964, job 72-233R, box 5, folder 24.
89. Unsigned, handwritten memorandum, "Mountain Scouts," n.d., job 72-233R, box 5, folder 5. Shown a copy, Gil Layton recalled having written it, some time after the fall of the Diem regime; Layton interview, 3 January 1995.
90. Blind memorandum, "Mountain Scouts," 10 July 1963, job 72-233R, box 5, folder 5.
91. "Mountain Scout/Paramilitary Political Action Program"; Blind memorandum, "Mountain Scouts."
92. Blind memorandum, "Montagnard Commando Political Action/Paramilitary Program, Mountain Scout Program Background," c. 1963, and Captain J. B. Healy, memorandum to chief, Combined Studies Division, "Visits to Mountain Commando Teams," 16 May 1963, both job 72-233R, box 5, folder 6. The persisting conceptual and semantic confusion prompted headquarters at one point to implore the station to clarify its inconsistent nomenclature (DIR 9113, 28 December 1962, job 72-233R, box 1, folder 12).

4. Sea Swallows and Strategic Hamlets

1. The Fighting Fathers are documented in job 91-270R, box 1. The background of the Combat Intelligence Team is contained in job 72-233R, box 5.
2. Job 91-270R, box 1; job 72-233R, box 5.
3. Memorandum, "The Past Present, and Future of the Sea Swallows," n.d., attachment to FVSA 14069, 17 August 1962, and SAIG 6618, 22 December 1961, both job 91-270R, box 1, folder 16.
4. "The Past Present, and Future of the Sea Swallows"; SAIG 6618.
5. Untitled memorandum, n.d., job 72-233R, box 5, folder 19; SAIG 7512, 19 February 1962, job 71-270R, box 1, folder 15.
6. SAIG 7512; FVSA 13338, 16 February 1962, job 91-270R, box 1, folder 15.
7. Untitled memorandum; FVSA 13338; SAIG 0471, 27 June 1962, job 91-270R, box 1, folder 15.
8. FVSA 13338.
9. Layton interview, 3 January 1995.
10. Jack Benefel, memorandum to chief of station, "Present and Proposed

Projects for Staybehind/Combat Intelligence Teams,” 4 December 1961, job 72-233R, box 5, folder 8; FVSA 16980, 13 January 1964; FVSA 14579; FVSA 13971, 8 June 1962, job 91-270R, box 1, folder 15.

11. FVSA 13791, 8 June 1962, attachment 15, job 91-270R, box 1, folder 15.

12. FVSA 13791, attachment 10.

13. FVSA 14449, 27 October 1962, FVSA 14497, 2 November 1962, SAIG 3582, c. October 1962, all job 66-436R, box 1, folder 7. Also see SAIG 4743, job 72-233R, box 5, folder 24.

14. FVST 4031, 6 September 1962, attachment 3.

15. East Asia Division job 72-233R, box 5, folder 7.

16. Case officer note to the author, May 1995.

17. Job 72-233R, box 5, folder 7. The authenticity of these otherwise very respectable results merits some skepticism because of the GVN practice of inflating combat statistics. The modest number of weapons captured—only thirty-five—compared with claimed VC manpower losses, also invites caution.

18. Colby, *Lost Victory*, 98–100; William Colby, interview by the author, 16 October 1991, Washington, DC.

19. Colby, *Lost Victory*, 100–101; Colby interview, 16 October 1991.

20. FVS 6695, 20 November 1961, and TDCS 3/497,031, 23 December 1961.

21. Colby, *Lost Victory*, 72, 100; Colby interview, 2 June 1995. In the interview, Colby made it explicit that he had shared the assumption about peasant anticommunism, and that he recognized the program’s potential, as announced by Nhu, to alienate the officials responsible for its execution. In his book, Colby summarizes the intended result: “The security of the hamlet should begin within it and gradually build the necessary defenses around that essentially political core” (100). Neither in this tortured passage nor elsewhere does he describe the “political core” or its relationship to security. He also fails to specify who will build and man the “necessary defenses.”

22. Colby interview, 2 June 1995; CS 3/505,316, 20 March 1962, job 78-1239R, box 1, folder 12. The authorship of the Strategic Hamlet program remains in some doubt. In *Lost Victory* and his interview with the author, Colby credits Nhu with the concept, and himself with having made self-defense the initial objective, preceding the “social revolution.” In his earlier book, Colby assigned more credit to Thompson, and implicitly to Diem: the Strategic Hamlet represented a strategy “that Thompson recommended and I was supporting” (see William Colby, *Honorable Men* [New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978], 177).

23. Colby interview, 16 October 1991; U.S. Department of Defense, *Pentagon Papers*, 2:128–29.

24. Richard A. Hunt, *Pacification: The American Struggle for Vietnam’s Hearts and Minds* (Boulder: Westview, 1995), 21; U.S. Department of Defense, *Pentagon Papers*, 2:128–29. The Hunt book is a well-documented study of U.S. military participation in pacification operations in South Vietnam.

25. SAIG 7554, 21 February 1962, job 91-270R, box 1, folder 15.

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26. Colby, *Lost Victory*, 102; Colby interview, 2 June 1995.
27. Colby, *Lost Victory*, 102; Colby interview, 2 June 1995.
28. FVS 6938; Colby interviews, 16 October 1991 and 2 June 1995; Colby, *Lost Victory*, 100.
29. FVS 7038, 7 February 1962, job 91-270R, box 1, folder 15. This report exemplifies Bill Colby's unflinching willingness to let dissenting voices be heard.
30. Blind memorandum, "Excerpt from Mr. Ngo Dinh Nhu's Address on Strategic Hamlets, Phan Thiet, March 19, 1962," attachment to memorandum "Vietnam, Mr. Thompson's Reports," 10 April 1962, job 66-436R, box 1, folder 11; FVS 6938, 16 January 1962.
31. FVS 6938; Race, *War Comes to Long An*.
32. "Excerpt from Mr. Ngo Dinh Nhu's Address."
33. Bergerud, *The Dynamics of Defeat*, 66–67; unsigned report of Robert Thompson debriefing in Honolulu in March 1963, n.d., job 66-436R, box 1, folder 11.
34. Job 66-436R, box 1, folder 11.
35. Colby, *Lost Victory*, 70.
36. U.S. Department of Defense, *Pentagon Papers*, 2:149; FVS 7159, 14 March 1962, and CS-3/505,316, 20 March 1962, both job 1239R, box 1, folder 12.
37. Colby interview, 16 October 1991.
38. Retyped Saigon cable (IN 16722), 9 April 1962, job 91-270R, box 1, folder 15.
39. Thai and Quang, *People's Army*, 147–55.
40. Perhaps the most poignant account of official resistance to bad news is David Halberstam's *The Making of a Quagmire: America and Vietnam during the Kennedy Era*, rev. ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), especially chap. 7.
41. "Paramilitary Groups in Vietnam (Definitions)."
42. Attachment to FVST 4002, 30 August 1962; FVST 4031, 6 September 1962, attachment 1.
43. FVST 4031, attachment 2.
44. *Ibid.*, attachments 2 and 3.
45. *Ibid.*, attachment 4.
46. John Richardson, memorandum for the record, "Meeting with Ngo Dinh Nhu on 18 October 1962," 23 October 1962, attachment to FVSA 14405.
47. *Ibid.*; FVST 4031.
48. Thai and Quang, *People's Army*, 147–55. One would not infer from this People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) history that the North Vietnamese leadership attached any more importance to the political-psychological aspects of the struggle than did, for example, General Harkins and John Richardson. That the PAVN perspective distorts overall North Vietnamese priorities is clear from accounts of VC organizational activity in rural South Vietnam, especially the Rand Corporation series of monographs on the subject.
49. Karnow, *Vietnam*, 259–62; Herring, *America's Longest War*, 93–96.
50. Hue dispatch 461. This study will use the French title for the Hue program in order to avoid confusion with the Popular Forces, the national militia known until 1964 as the Self-Defense Corps. Regarding the invisible Ngo Dinh

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Can: although Jim Mullen had a long private meeting with a visiting Diem at Can's villa in September 1962, he never in his two years in Hue caught sight of Can himself. Mullen recalled that the meeting with Diem took place in a "dim cavern" of a room that he thought might well have concealed an eavesdropping Can. During this session, Diem lectured Mullen for two and a half hours on the dangers of Americans preempting what were properly Vietnamese responsibilities for the conduct and improvement of governance (Mullen interview, 6 January 1995).

51. Hue dispatch 461.

52. *Ibid.*; "Report on CIA Counterinsurgency Operations in Southeast Asia," attachment 2 to Brigadier General L. A. Walsh, memorandum, "A Survey of Southeast Asia Operations," c. November 1962, job 72-233R, box 5, folder 23.

53. Hue dispatch 461; "Report on CIA Counterinsurgency Operations in Southeast Asia."

54. Hue dispatch 461; "Report on CIA Counterinsurgency Operations in Southeast Asia."

55. Hue dispatch 461; "Report on CIA Counterinsurgency Operations in Southeast Asia."

56. Hue dispatch 461; "Report on CIA Counterinsurgency Operations in Southeast Asia."

57. Hue Dispatch 461.

58. *Ibid.*; Mullen interview, 6 January 1995.

59. Mullen interview, 6 January 1995.

60. Hue Dispatch 461; William Colby, telephone interview by the author, 5 June 1995.

61. Colby interview, 5 June 1995; Hue Dispatch 461.

62. Hue Dispatch 461.

63. *Ibid.*

64. *Ibid.*

65. *Ibid.*

66. *Ibid.*

67. *Ibid.*

68. *Ibid.*

69. TDCS 3/513,245, 8 June 1962.

70. FVSA 14178, 13 September 1962.

71. SAIG 1991, 28 November 1962, job 91-270R, box 1, folder 16; Mullen interview, 6 January 1995; draft project outline, 31 December 1964, job 78-2443R, box 2, folder 7.

72. FVSA 16118, 1 July 1963, job 78-2443R, box 2, folder 7. In an incident that he attributed to the Smith-Strathern desire to curb his admittedly freewheeling advocacy of FP, Mullen recalled being summoned to the office of the deputy chief of mission, William Trueheart. Trueheart ordered Mullen to cease his work with the Interior Ministry, and demanded that he acknowledge having understood and accepted his instructions. Mullen was left with the impression that he'd been set up by his superiors (Mullen interview, 6 January 1995).

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5. Operation Switchback

1. Colby, *Lost Victory*, 164.
2. Draft blind memorandum, “Resolution of Funding Problems Relative to CIA/DOD,” with handwritten date “Jan 63,” job 66-436R, box 1, folder 8. The Special Group was also known as the 5412 Committee, and later as the 303, then the 40 Committee.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Draft history of Operation Switchback, “Part II: The Field Story,” n.d., job 72-233R, box 1, folder 6.
5. SAIG 1312, 5 August 1962, job 66-436R, box 1, folder 7.
6. William Colby, memorandum to the DCI, “Decline in Numbers and Effectiveness of the Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) Program from 1963 to 1965,” 17 December 1965, job 78-597R, box 1, folder 13.
7. “Part II: The Field Story.”
8. *Ibid.*
9. William Colby, memorandum to the deputy director of Central Intelligence, “Status Report—Operation Switchback (Turn-over of Certain CIA Counterinsurgency Activities in South Vietnam to the US Military),” 29 November 1962, job 77-436R, box 1, folder 7.
10. SAIG 4743, 10 January 1963, job 72-233R, box 5, folder 24.
11. FVST 4031, attachment 3.
12. *Ibid.*; SAIG 0637, 5 July 1962, job 72-233R, box 1, folder 12.
13. SAIG 1799, 23 August 1962, job 72-233R, box 1, folder 12.
14. DIR 00338, 21 November 1962, job 66-436R, box 1, folder 7; Colby, “Status Report—Operation Switchback.”
15. DIR 00338; Colby, “Status Report—Operation Switchback”; SAIG 3931, 26 November 1962, job 66-436R, box 1, folder 7.
16. SAIG 0637, 5 July 1962, job 72-233R, box 1, folder 12. Regarding the date of Morton’s assumption of CIDG command, see Gilbert Layton, memorandum to Colonel Le Quang Tung, “Division of Responsibilities,” 28 January 1963, reprinted in “Vietnam Journal,” 30 January 1963, job 72-233R, box 5, folder 18.
17. SAIG 0637; Layton, “Division of Responsibilities.” One might think that the Special Forces themselves, trained to support indigenous partisans, would have been a more logical candidate, even had they not already been in South Vietnam in substantial numbers.
18. SAIG 4743, 10 January 1963, job 72-233R, box 5, folder 24.
19. Layton, “Division of Responsibilities.”
20. FVSA 14887, 10 January 1963, and FVSA 15186, 15 February 1963, both job 91-270R, box 1, folder 17; Layton, “Division of Responsibilities.”
21. SAIG 4743, 10 January 1963, job 72-233R, box 5, folder 24.
22. Blind memorandum, “Plans for Coverage by U.S. Special Forces Teams for CIDG Programs Proposed in Quang Ngai, Quang Tin, and Quang Nam Provinces,” c. September 1962, job 72-233R, box 5, folder 23.

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23. Carroll E. Ingram, memorandum CSD/532, 25 February 1963, job 72-233R, box 3, folder 12.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid.; FVSA 14864, 28 December 1962, job 91-270R, box 1, folder 16.
26. Carroll E. Ingram, memorandum to Colonel Layton, "Critique of Operation Switchback," 1 May 1963, job 66-436R, box 1, folder 7.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid.
29. Layton interview, 3 January 1995.
30. SAIG 2806, 3 October 1962, job 66-436R, box 1, folder 7; [support element cable] 6703, 26 January 1963, job 66-436R, box 1, folder 8.
31. [Support element cable] 6703.
32. Major General William B. Rosson, report to chief of staff, U.S. Army, "Special Warfare Field Visit to Vietnam and Okinawa, 13–30 January 1963," 30 January 1963, job 66-436R, box 1, folder 8.
33. Ibid.
34. SAIG 5454, 16 February 1963, and William Colby, memorandum to the director of Central Intelligence, "General Wheeler's Report on Vietnam," 6 February 1963, both job 66-436R, box 1, folder 8.
35. William Colby, unsigned document, "Notes from meeting with Governor Harriman, 6 February 1963," n.d.; William Colby, memorandum to the acting director of Central Intelligence, "Operation Switchback," 14 February 1963; William Colby, memorandum for the record, "Meeting of the Special Group (CI) 7 Feb 1963," n.d., all job 66-436R, box 1, folder 8. Job 66-436R, box 1, folder 8; Colby, "General Wheeler's Report."
36. Colby, "Operation Switchback."
37. SAIG 5319, 11 February 1963, job 66-436R, box 1, folder 8.
38. SAIG 5454.
39. FVST 5787, 3 July 1963, job 66-436R, box 1, folder 10; SAIG 6581, 8 April 1963, job 66-436R, box 1, folder 9.
40. SAIG 6355, 30 March 1963, job 66-436R, box 1, folder 9; SAIG 6581.
41. SAIG 6355.
42. Ibid.
43. SAIG 6401, 2 April 1963, job 66-436R, box 1, folder 9.
44. "Vietnam Journal," 6 May 1963, job 72-233R, box 1, folder 6.
45. FVSA 16980.
46. SAIG 7326, 10 May 1963, job 66-436R, box 1, folder 10.
47. Untitled, unsigned blind memorandum, n.d., c. mid-1963, job 72-233R, box 1, folder 6.
48. Layton interview, 3 January 1995.
49. Memorandum, "Position and Responsibilities," 22 May 1963, job 72-233R, box 3, folder 11; Burke et al., *U.S. Army Special Forces Operations*, chap. 5, citing a MACV report of December 1963.
50. Burke et al., *U.S. Army Special Forces Operations*.

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51. Blind memorandum, “Mountain Scouts,” 10 July 1963; two sets of unsigned notes of a station–MACV meeting on 30 July 1963, and SAIG 9714, 2 August 1963, both job 72-233R, box 5, folder 6.

52. Colby, “Decline in Numbers and Effectiveness of the Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) Program from 1963 to 1965.”

53. Ibid.

6. Experiments in the Lowlands

1. For an account of the coup against Diem, and the agency role therein, see Ahern, *CIA and the House of Ngo*, chaps. 12–15.

2. William Colby, memorandum for the record, “Presidential Meeting on Vietnam, 21 December 1963,” n.d., job 78-597R, box 1, folder 8; William Colby, memorandum for the record, “Briefings of Secretary McNamara and Mr. McCone in Saigon, 19 and 20 December 1963,” 24 December 1963, job 78-597R, box 1, folder 8.

3. Colby, “Presidential Meeting on Vietnam”; Colby, “Briefings of Secretary McNamara and Mr. McCone.”

4. David R. Smith, interview by the author, 6 October 1992, Silver Spring, MD.

5. Embassy telegram 1594, 20 February 1964, quoted in J. S. Earman, inspector general, memorandum to the director, “Record on Vietnam,” 12 November 1964, CIA History Staff files; Thai and Quang, *People’s Army*, 165–66.

6. Herring, *America’s Longest War*, 110–12.

7. Methven interview, 17 June 1995.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.

11. SAIG 6230, 26 March 1963, job 78-2443R, box 2, folder 7.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.; Methven interview, 17 June 1995.

14. Methven interview, 17 June 1995.

15. Ibid.

16. FVSA 16570, 7 October 1963, job 78-2443R, box 2, folder 7.

17. SAIG 1003, 18 September 1963, job 78-2433R, box 2, folder 7.

18. Rufus Phillips, telephone interview by the author, 20 November 1992.

19. Methven interview, 17 June 1995.

20. Tran Ngoc Chau, interview by the author, 26–28 April 1995, Woodland Hills, CA.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid. Chau later also survived an assassination attempt in Kien Hoa, imprisonment both by the Thieu government and, after 1975, by the communists, and finally, with his family, a voyage by small boat to Indonesia. He later became a U.S. citizen, residing in Los Angeles.

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24. Ibid.

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid. As we have seen, the GVN's propaganda arm, the Vietnam Information Service, conducted the propaganda aspect of the campaign.

28. Ibid.

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid. Chau added that his program soon attracted U.S. attention. His training center received visits, first from the U.S. Army adviser to the Seventh ARVN Division, headquartered at My Tho, then from successive MAAG commanders, Lieutenant General Lionel McGarr and Major General Charles Timmes. Robert G. K. Thompson, of Malayan renown, also inspected Chau's work.

32. Ibid. Ten days into his new assignment, Chau got another summons to the palace, where Diem asked if the family had yet joined him. Chau said not yet, and Diem instructed him to attend to this at once, in order to avoid the damage to Chau's authority that would result from any yielding to the well-known charm of the ladies of Kien Hoa.

33. Phillips interview, 20 November 1995; Methven interview, 17 June 1995.

34. Chau interview, 26–28 April 1995.

35. Methven interview, 17 June 1995.

36. Chau interview, 26–28 April 1995; Putney Westerfield, memorandum, "Field Trip to Ben Tre, 29–30 June 1956," 16 July 1956, attachment to FVSA 3342, job 78-1184, box 10, folder 10.

37. Chau interview, 26–28 April 1995; John B. O'Donnell, "The Strategic Hamlet Program in Kien Hoa Province, South Vietnam: A Case Study of Counter-Insurgency," in *Southeast Asian Tribes, Minorities, and Nations*, ed. Peter Kunstadter (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967), chap. 18.

38. Chau interview, 26–28 April 1995.

39. Methven interview, 17 June 1995.

40. Major General Le Van Nghiem, letter to Major General Stilwell, 7 January 1964, and passim, job 72-233R, box 5, folder 36.

41. Ibid.

42. FVSA 17116, 17 February 1964, job 78-21443, box 2, folder 8.

43. I was transferred from Da Nang to Saigon in late November 1963, and joined PAS as it began its expansion. The description of the atmosphere in late 1963 and early 1964 is drawn from that experience. PAS succeeded the Political Operations Section.

44. FVSA 17116, 17 February 1964, job 78-21443, box 2, folder 8; FVSA 17286, 31 March 1964, job 78-2443R, box 2, folder 8.

45. FVSA 17116; FVSA 17286.

46. FVSS 3840, 9 January 1964, job 78-2443R, box 2, folder 8.

47. Ibid.

48. Contact report of meeting with Hoan on 5 May 1964, dated 6 May 1964, Hoan dossier.

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7. The Kien Hoa Incubator

1. Methven introduced me to Chau as the station case officer when the new activity reached the implementation stage in about March 1964.

2. Ibid.

3. Chau interview, 26–28 April 1995; John O'Reilly, interview by the author, 7 February 1995, McLean, VA. The reader may note the gradual replacement of the term *counterinsurgency* with *pacification*. This occurred, apparently spontaneously, in American usage in Vietnam about the time of the coup against Ngo Dinh Diem. At no time did either term preclude the use of the other.

4. Chau interview, 26–28 April 1995.

5. Ibid.

6. Author's recollection.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.; FVSA 17339, 9 April 1964, job 78-2443R, box 2, folder 8.

9. FVSA 17339.

10. Ibid.

11. William Colby, memorandum, "Saigon Station," 3 June 1964, job 78-597R, box 1, folder 10.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.; O'Donnell, "The Strategic Hamlet Program."

14. Contact report, attachment to FVSA 17791, 27 August 1964, job 78-2443R, box 2, folder 8.

15. Author's recollection.

16. FVSA 17715, 8 August 1964, job 78-2443R, box 2, folder 8.

17. Ibid.

18. SAIG 6808, 9 June 1964, job 78-2443R, box 2, folder 8.

19. O'Reilly interview, 7 February 1995.

20. Ibid. This decentralization also created opportunities for peculation by CIA case officers themselves. This appears to have occurred very rarely; I know of only one such case, which I understand to have involved less than \$2,000.

21. FVSA 17715.

22. Ibid.

23. Thomas A. Donohue, interview by the author, 19 January 1995, Arlington, VA.

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid.

27. Cooper et al., *The American Experience with Pacification*, 2:42; FVSA 17836, 7 September 1964, job 78-2162R, box 4, folder 1. The station dispatch describing the Hop Tac oil spot left out, presumably by oversight, the various province and district capitals in the Hop Tac area that also qualified as under firm GVN control.

28. U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1968*, vol. 1, *Vietnam, 1964* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1992), 948–55.

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29. FVSA 18025, 30 October 1964, job 78-2443R, box 2, folder 8.

30. FVSA 18194, 22 December 1964, job 78-2443, box 2, folder 8.

31. FVSA 19779, 14 February 1966, job 649R, box 2, folder 25.

32. Chau interview, 26–28 April 1995.

33. O'Reilly interview, 7 February 1995.

34. Ibid.

35. Ibid.

36. Chau interview, 26–28 April 1995.

37. Ibid.

38. O'Reilly interview, 7 February 1995. O'Reilly recalled that Captain Chau was later killed trying to save a U.S. adviser during a battle in Go Cong Province after being made a district chief there.

39. Ibid.

40. Ibid. As province chief, Colonel Chau exercised no control over bombing missions or sweep operations. The Seventh Division, with headquarters in My Tho, Dinh Tuong Province, ran ARVN operations in Kien Hoa. Both Vietnamese and U.S. combat air elements conducted raids based on their own intelligence.

41. Ibid. It may be that, by 1964 or 1965, the potentially politically active segment of the population had already declared itself, one way or another, and that the villagers targeted by the pacification programs represented a politically passive residue, albeit perhaps a large one. This might explain O'Reilly's impression that a sense of nationalism was largely absent.

42. Methven interview, 17 June 1995.

43. Ibid.; undated note, c. May 1995, from the case officer who replaced Methven as the Tay Ninh case officer in early 1964.

44. FVSW 7947, 28 May 1964, and FVSA 17524, 10 June 1964, both job 78-2443R, box 2, folder 8.

45. FVSA 17746, 17 August 1964, job 78-2443R, box 2, folder 8.

46. FVSA 17394, 27 April 1964, job 78-2443R, box 2, folder 8.

47. FVSA 17490, 26 May 1964, job 78-2443R, box 2, folder 8.

48. FVSA 17917, 28 September 1964, job 78-2443R, box 2, folder 8. Regarding station correspondence of that period, I probably drafted the dispatch quoted here; I also prepared many of the reports on the programs' results, especially those dealing with Kien Hoa and the other provinces of the ARVN Seventh Division area, plus Long An Province.

49. FVSA 17815, 3 September 1964, job 78-2443R, box 2, folder 8.

50. William Rydell, memorandum, "Meeting with Ev Bumgardner of USIA," 9 October 1964, job 78-2443R, box 2, folder 8.

51. Ibid.

52. FVSA 17685, 29 July 1964, job 78-2443R, box 2, folder 8. APA teams had a total of 1,718 men, while Counter-Terror had 1,068 and Census-Grievance 111 (see FVSA 18163, 1 December 1964, job 78-2443R, box 2, folder 8).

53. Thai and Quang, *People's Army*, 186ff. Translator Merle Pribbenow sees the scale and speed of the North Vietnamese Army deployment, as described in

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People's Army, as reflecting Hanoi's desire for a decisive victory over ARVN before the United States could introduce sufficient forces to prevent this. For the Allen prediction, see Donohue interview, 19 January 1995.

54. FVSA 18244, 9 January 1965, job 78-2162R, box 4, folder 1.

55. *Ibid.* Robert J. Myers, Colby's deputy in FE Division, visited Vietnam in November 1964 and came home with the impression, presumably acquired from sources other than De Silva, that ARVN, with U.S. military support, was "doing a magnificent job" preventing the expansion of areas under communist military control in the South. Myers thought that the GVN's ability to provide economic benefits through the rural cadre programs worked to its long-term advantage. In all of this, Myers seems to have been generalizing from his exposure to the Kien Hoa programs. The desperation of U.S. officials in Saigon to meet the immediate threat may be seen in a station proposal to create at least a psychological threat to the Hanoi regime by air-dropping 50,000 pistols into North Vietnam (see Robert J. Myers, memorandum for the record, "Meeting with General Wheeler and General Anthis on Dropping Pistols into North Vietnam, 24 November 1964," 24 November 1964, job 78-597R, box 1, folder 9). For the influence of electoral politics on Vietnam policy, see U.S. Department of Defense, *Pentagon Papers*, 3:2–4.

8. The People's Action Team

1. Telegram from the embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State, 6 October 1964, U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1968*, vol. 1, *Vietnam, 1964*, 813; FVST 8511, 6 November 1964, job 90-270R, box 1, folder 13; Donohue interview, 19 January 1995; Methven interview, 17 June 1995.

2. SAIG 6831, 9 June 1964, and FVSA 18176, 14 December 1964, both job 78-2443R, box 2, folder 8.

3. SAIG 6831; FVSA 18176.

4. *Ibid.* For background on the Viet Minh/Viet Cong presence in Annam, see Chau interview, 26–28 April 1995.

5. SAIG 6831.

6. FVST 8511. De Silva did not further describe the PAT's aggressive stance, but he seems in the context of other reporting to have meant vigorous reaction to communist encroachments on PAT work in the hamlets rather than offensive operations against regular VC formations.

7. *Ibid.* Ralph Johnson acknowledged, after inquiries from Saigon, that the high rate of reported VC captures was "an extraordinary event," and that "preliminary assessment" indicated that the prisoners were "not hard core VC but fairly recently recruited" (see FVSA 18207, 27 December 1964, job 78-2443R, box 2, folder 8). The contention on this point illustrated the difficulty of determining the precise status of participants—on occasion mere bystanders—in the struggle, and thus of evaluating the effect of pacification operations.

8. FVST 8511.

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9. Ibid.

10. Rydell, “Meeting with Ev Bumgardner of USIA.”

11. Ibid. At some point in November, De Silva proposed to Ambassador Taylor abolishing the post of sector commander, responsible to ARVN, and the return to the Interior Ministry of authority over province chiefs. Regional and Popular Forces should also be subordinated to the Interior Ministry, De Silva said, if they were to become an effective pacification force. But continued GVN military reverses only accelerated the trend toward militarization of government authority, and in July 1965 the Joint General Staff took over responsibility for the RF and the PF. See FVST 9191, 25 March 1965, job 92-649R, box 4, folder 45; Edward Lansdale, memorandum, “Talk with General Thang, July 18,” 20 July 1965, job 92-649R, box 4, folder 46.

12. Rydell, “Meeting with Ev Bumgardner of USIA.”

13. FVST 8593, 19 November 1964, job 90-270R, box 1, folder 13.

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid.

18. William E. Colby, memorandum to the director of Central Intelligence, “Implications of Saigon Station Experiment in Counterinsurgency,” 24 November 1964, job 78-597R, box 1, folder 9. The Colby memo says that De Silva explicitly asked headquarters not to try selling the PAT concept to Ambassador Taylor during the latter’s visit, but to confine itself to “support and agreement in a low key.”

19. Ibid. As his later writings made clear, Colby did not agree with De Silva that all earlier efforts had enjoyed “absolutely no success,” or even that the PAT represented a conceptual breakthrough. But with admirable restraint he confined himself, at this point, to saying that the Quang Ngai experiment “is not an isolated example, since other small teams have similarly proved themselves in action in Vietnam.” See William E. Colby, memorandum to the director of Central Intelligence, “Saigon Station Experiment in Counterinsurgency,” 14 November 1964, attached to the memorandum cited directly above.

20. SAIG 0244, 26 November 1964, job 91-270R, box 1, folder 13.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid.; Saigon Embassy telegram 1817 to Department of State, 15 December 1964, job 92-649R, box 3, folder 41. The transparent evasion of the fact of agency reengagement in paramilitary activity seems to have reflected the desire of both CIA and U.S. military officials not to let the unhappy history of Operation Switchback prevent the exploitation of what both sides now saw as a promising response to a desperate situation.

23. FVST 8637, 30 November 1964, job 91-270R, box 1, folder 18.

24. FVSW 8225, 5 December 1964, job 78-2162R, box 4, folder 1.

25. FVSA 18177, 15 December 1964, job 91-270R, box 1, folder 13.

26. Ibid. De Silva expresses his antagonism toward the U.S. military command

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even more forcefully in his book than in his official correspondence. See *Sub Rosa: The Uses of Intelligence* (New York: Times Books, 1978), 226 and *passim*.

27. FVSA 18294, 19 January 1965, and FVSA 18350, 3 February 1965, both job 92-649R, box 5, folder 61.

28. FVSA 18350. In his memoirs, De Silva abandoned this relatively nuanced assessment in favor of a categorical, sometimes emotional, assertion that “terror” constituted the sole VC instrument of influence over the villagers: “The Vietcong had only one inducement to offer the peasantry to make them cooperative; the use or threat of terror” (*Sub Rosa*, 226). Other agency observers explicitly acknowledged the positive side of VC proselyting, even as they underplayed the importance of ideology and political programs. Harry Slifer, in charge of the South Vietnam desk at headquarters after a tour of duty in Saigon, drafted a memorandum to the State Department noting that “the Viet Cong have proven to be very effective in the application of the four guerrilla principles [live, eat, sleep, and work with the people] to win the peasantry over to their side.” He said that CIA had noticed the VC emphasis on “practical help, devoid of esoteric ideological preaching, and has begun to apply the same methods to win the peasantry over to the GVN side” (memorandum to Ambassador Leonard A. Unger, “Reporting to the President on Non-military Programs in Vietnam,” 31 August 1965, job 78-597R, box 1, folder 12).

29. Unsigned draft memorandum, “Discussion of Topic 2: Progress of Struggle against the Viet Cong,” 4 February 1965, Saigon Embassy files, FRC 68A 5612, Organization 7 Visits, Records Group 84, Washington National Records Center, Washington, DC.

30. *Ibid.*

31. FVSA 18260, 18 January 1965, job 92-649R, box 2, folder 25.

32. *Ibid.*

33. *Ibid.*

34. W. C. Westmoreland, memorandum to Mr. De Silva, “Doctrine of Pacification as It Applies to the Rural Population,” 14 February 1965, job 92-649R, box 4, folder 45.

35. *Ibid.*

36. FVSA 18443, 28 February 1965, job 92-649R, box 2, folder 25.

37. *Ibid.*

38. *Ibid.*

39. Herring, *America’s Longest War*, 128–31.

40. *Ibid.*, 131–32, 135–40. Also see Harry G. Summers, *Vietnam War Almanac* (New York: Facts on File, 1985), 33–36.

41. Donohue interview, 19 January 1995.

42. Memorandum to the director of Central Intelligence, “Expansion of the Provincial Reconnaissance (PRU) Program,” 20 March 1968, job 82-51, box 5, folder 4. I had left Vietnam two weeks before the bomb devastated the office I shared with the other covert action officers.

43. Bergerud, *The Dynamics of Defeat*, 42; Jeffrey Clarke, *Advice and Support: The Final Years* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 1988), 114; Saigon

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Embassy airgrams A-50, 21 July 1965, and A-78, 2 August 1965, both attached to FVSA 19018, 12 August 1965, job 92-649R, box 2, folder 25. The prevailing American perception of GVN leadership drought is colorfully expressed in Clarke's quotation of a MACV adviser describing the III Corps commander's staff: General Tri had "'no G-1, a weak G-3 and a lazy G-4,' and a chief of staff who was a 'fine fellow' but a 'buffoon'" (114).

44. Bergerud, *The Dynamics of Defeat*, 42; Clarke, *Advice and Support*, 114; Saigon Embassy airgrams A-50 and A-78.

45. Joseph W. Smith, memorandum to the director of Central Intelligence, "CIA Intelligence Support to U.S. Marine Corps Victory at Chu Lai, Vietnam," 25 August 1965, job 92-649R, box 5, folder 65; William E. Colby, memorandum to deputy director of Central Intelligence, "Briefing of Mahon Sub-committee," job 78-597, box 1, folder 12.

46. FVSW 6032, 30 September 1965, job 76-600, box 2.

47. Extracts from Hue Consulate airgram A-13, 12 October 1965, and Hue Consulate airgram A-17, 4 November 1965, both job 72-192R, box 5.

48. Robert H. Miller, State Department "Monthly Report on Non-military Programs to the White House for Period 1 October–10 November 1965," 15 November 1965, and Hue Consulate airgram A-18, 9 November 1965, both job 72-192R, box 5.

49. Methven interview, 17 June 1995; William E. Colby, memorandum to William Bundy, "Montagnard Situation," 30 December 1965, job 78-597R, box 1, folder 13; "Outline for Talk on Truong Son (Montagnard) RD Program," n.d., job 71-757R, box 1.

50. Robert J. Myers, memorandum to acting director of Central Intelligence, "CIA Involvement with Montagnard Tribal People," 25 September 1964, job 78-597R, box 1, folder 9. The resource control activity mentioned here may have represented an intention more than a fact; no other references to it have been found.

51. William E. Colby, memorandum, "Opening of CIA-Subsidized Montagnard Training School in Pleiku, Vietnam," 23 April 1965, job 78-597R, box 1, folder 10; Myers, "CIA Involvement with Montagnard Tribal People."

52. Colby, "Opening of CIA-Subsidized Montagnard Training School."

53. William E. Colby, memorandum to Major General R. H. Anthis, "Transmittal of CAS Messages from Saigon," 5 August 1965, job 78-597R, box 1, folder 12; FVSA 18200, 23 December 1965, job 78-2443R, box 2, folder 8.

54. Colby, "Montagnard Situation."

9. Another Chance in the Countryside

1. L. Goure et al., *Some Findings of the Viet Cong Motivation and Morale Study: June–December 1965* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 1966), 19–21.

2. Cooper et al., *The American Experience with Pacification*, 2:16; Thai and Quang, *People's Army*, 232–36.

3. W. P. Davison, *Some Observations on Viet Cong Operations in the Villages*, 2nd ed. (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 1968), 164–70. Among the U.S.

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agencies active in South Vietnam it was the Air Force that, for reasons unknown, took the lead in trying to determine, on a reasonably rigorous empirical basis, the mentalities of both VC activists and the villagers among whom they worked. The interview methodology (or methodologies: Rand sent a number of researchers to Vietnam) employed in the Rand series is not described in enough detail to establish that it always avoided appearing to solicit a desired reply. But the interviews were conducted in enough depth at least to prevent respondents from confining their replies to possibly evasive generalities.

4. Ibid.; Goure et al., *Some Findings of the Viet Cong Motivation and Morale Study*, 14–18, 44; D. W. P. Elliot and C. A. H. Thompson, *A Look at the VC Cadres: Dinh Tuong Province, 1965–1966* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 1967), 63. This study differs from the other Rand products in attributing VC influence to “intimidation and terror” more than to “persuasion and voluntary cooperation” (see 24–25).

5. Goure et al., *Some Findings of the Viet Cong Motivation and Morale Study*, 19–21.

6. Cited in Bergerud, *The Dynamics of Defeat*, 81–82. Bergerud here quotes Daniel Ellsberg on the remark of the Hau Nghia Province chief that 200,000 of his 220,000 constituents were ruled by the VC: “I am not a province chief, I am a hamlet chief.”

7. FVSA 18135, 3 December 1964, job 92-649R, box 1, folder 1.

8. FVSA 18290, 19 January 1965, and FVSA 18883, 2 July 1965, both job 92-649R, box 2, folder 25.

9. FVSA 18290; FVSA 18883.

10. FVSA 19468, 2 December 1965, job 92-649R, box 2.

11. William E. Colby, memorandum to the director of Central Intelligence, “Evidence of the Effectiveness of CIA Counter-Terror Operations in South Vietnam,” c. 10 September 1965, job 92-649R, box 1, folder 1.

12. FVSA 19434, 23 November 1965, job 92-649R, box 2, folder 25; Donohue interview, 19 January 1995.

13. FVSA 19434.

14. O’Reilly interview, 7 February 1995.

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid.

19. SAIG 4106, 19 May 1965, job 649R, box 5, folder 71.

20. Hue airgram A-18 contains an example of APA intelligence collection in Quang Tin Province.

21. SAIG 4106, 19 May 1965, job 92-649R, box 5, folder 71; DIR 12222, c. 20 May 1965, job 76-600R, box 2.

22. Description of the station’s style from the author’s recollection; Donohue interview, 19 January 1995.

23. SAIG 7175, 13 October 1965, job 76-600R, box 2. For the definition of black operations, see Donohue interview, 19 January 1995.

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24. Donohue interview, 19 January 1995; FVSW 8633, 4 November 1965, job 92-649R, box 1, folder 10.

25. FVSA 19271, 13 October 1965, and SAIG 7299, 19 October 1965, both job 92-649, box 2, folder 25. In the fall of 1963, CIA cut off support only to those paramilitary assets deployed or deployable against Buddhist dissidents.

26. Thomas A. Donohue, interview by the author, 23 January 1995, Arlington, VA. I recall the ready agreement of Major Al Francisco and his U.S. Special Forces “A” team at Moc Hoa to train the first Counter-Terror team, from Kien Hoa. Whether Francisco did this on his own authority—moonlighting, as it were—or solicited his headquarters’ approval is not recalled. With the Cat Lo facility not yet ready, this kind of help was indispensable to the launching of the C-T program in 1964.

27. Hunt, *Pacification*, 66. Lodge first expressed interest in the PATs during a briefing by Donohue, generated by a letter to Lodge from a friend who mentioned Donohue’s name. Once committed to the station’s approach, Lodge left the details to his political counselor, Philip Habib, who also favored their expansion. Habib was unafraid of ambassadorial displeasure, and his willingness to push uncongenial points, sometimes on the station’s behalf, would periodically get him ejected from Lodge’s office (see Donohue interview, 19 January 1995).

28. Hunt, *Pacification*, 29; SAIG 6857, 29 September 1965, job 92-649R, box 2, folder 25.

29. Donohue interview, 23 January 1995; FVST 10375, 18 September 1965, job 78-597R, box 1, folder 12.

30. DIR 51729, 20 October 1965, job 649R, box 4, folder 45.

31. *Ibid.*

32. FVSA 19096, 3 September 1965, job 92-649R, box 2, folder 25; Kahin, *Intervention*, 344–45.

33. FVSA 19096.

34. *Ibid.*

35. *Ibid.*

36. SAIG 8260, 1 December 1965, job 92-649R, box 2, folder 25.

37. Unsigned letter, probably retyped copy, Henry Cabot Lodge to Admiral Raborn, 17 November 1965, job 92-649R, box 4, folder 49.

38. Bundy, quoted in Hunt, *Pacification*, 68. Bundy’s language implies that he saw no need, at this point, to integrate military with nonmilitary measures.

39. For the station’s emphasis on continued autonomy, see Thomas A. Donohue, interview by the author, 13 February 1996, Arlington, VA.

40. SAIG 7532, 28 October 1965, and SAIG 7633, 2 November 1965, both job 92-649R, box 2, folder 14.

41. SAIG 7532; SAIG 7633.

42. William E. Colby, memorandum to the deputy director for Plans, “Pacification Plan Prepared by Lt. Col. Tran Ngoc Chau,” 30 November 1965, job 92-649R, box 2, folder 25.

43. *Ibid.*

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44. Ibid.
45. Donohue interview, 19 January 1995; Chau interview, 26–28 April 1995.
46. DIR 57811, 13 November 1965, job 92-649R, box 2, folder 16.
47. Ibid.
48. SAIG 7933, 15 November 1965, job 92-649R, box 2, folder 16.
49. Ibid.
50. SAIG 7975, 17 November 1965, job 92-649R, box 2, folder 25.
51. SAIG 8260. McNamara declared himself at a loss to find a better pacification formula, given that the United States had already fielded its best team for this purpose. Jorgensen, summarizing this for headquarters, commented that “I think it probably fair to say that [he] was not thinking of [the] Station when he made this complimentary remark [about the team].” The COS also noted General DePuy’s “disingenuous” explanation of the Marine presentation by asserting a need to balance Lansdale’s general presentation with something more geographically focused.
52. Ibid.
53. Ibid.
54. Ibid.
55. Ibid.
56. Ibid.
57. Ibid.
58. SAIG 8955, 30 December 1965, and FVSA 19593, 31 December 1965, both job 92-649R, box 2, folder 25. The competition had its lighter moments; one of them came when General Westmoreland facetiously offered Jorgensen a MACV adviser for his army (see Donohue interview, 19 January 1995).
59. Cooper et al., *The American Experience with Pacification*, 2:295–96.
60. Ibid.
61. Saigon Embassy telegram, 19 August 1966, job 92-649R, box 4, folder 44.
62. Saigon Embassy telegram 3063, 22 February 1966, job 92-649R, box 5, folder 65.
63. Saigon Embassy airgram A-248, 10 November 1966, job 92-649R, box 4, folder 47.
64. Cooper et al., *The American Experience with Pacification*, 1:296–97; Hunt, *Pacification*, 70–71.
65. Donohue interview, 19 January 1995; William J. Porter, memorandum to Robert W. Komer, “Proposal for Rapid Increase in Number of Revolutionary Development Groups,” 6 April 1966, job 92-649R, box 2, folder 16; FVSA 20048, 12 April 1966, job 92-649R, box 3, folder 26 (in this dispatch, Gordon Jorgensen said that Komer had also “recently expressed very grave doubt as to the advisability of even trying to get AID to pick up the program”); Harold Ford, memorandum for the record, “Conversation with Robert Komer re Vietnam,” 21 May 1990, CIA History Staff.
66. William E. Colby, memorandum for the record on team funding, 24 January 1966, job 78-646, box 1, folder 4.

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67. *Ibid.*

68. FVSA 19784, 14 February 1966, job 92-649R, box 2, folder 61. The uncertainty about nomenclature is perpetuated here, with the station eschewing the official U.S. terminology, Revolutionary Development, in favor of the literal translation of the Vietnamese for Rural Construction. Station correspondence continues to use the term *pacification* for the program as a whole.

69. Ford, “Conversation with Robert Komer”; U.S. Department of Defense, *Pentagon Papers*, 2:568–69. The *Pentagon Papers* historian does not say whether Komer specified the “questionable aspects.” Like the program itself, Thang’s ministry, called Revolutionary Development by the Americans, remained the Ministry of Rural Construction to the GVN.

70. Porter, “Proposal for Rapid Increase in Number of Revolutionary Groups”; William E. Colby, memorandum to the director of Central Intelligence, “Expansion of the Rural Development Cadre Program in Vietnam,” 22 April 1966, job 92-649R, box 5, folder 63; undated blind memorandum, “Expansion of the Rural Development Cadre Program in Vietnam,” and Director 07970, 27 May 1966, and *passim*, job 92-649R, box 2, folder 16.

71. Saigon Embassy airgram A-709, 28 June 1966, job 92-649R, box 2, folder 26.

72. FVSA 19821, 21 February 1966, job 92-649R, box 2, folder 25. This dispatch transmits a Lansdale “fact sheet” for Vice President Humphrey.

10. Growing Pains

1. U.S. Department of Defense, *Pentagon Papers*, 2:580–82.

2. MACV telegram 14162, 24 April 1966, job 92-649R, box 4, folder 46.

3. *Ibid.*

4. South Korea sent forces that eventually included two infantry divisions and a marine brigade, while smaller contingents came from members of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO).

5. SAIG 1711, 12 April 1966, job 92-649R, box 3, folder 26.

6. FVSA 21059, 15 October 1966, job 92-649R, box 3, folder 26.

7. Saigon 2832, 19 May 1966, job 92-649R, box 5, folder 71; SAIG 0230, 19 February 1966, and Saigon Embassy airgram A-489, 23 February 1966, job 92-649R, box 2. In the spring of 1966, the full names of originators and addressees of CIA cables replaced abbreviations like DIR and SAIG.

8. Gary Williams, interview by the author, Langley, VA, 17 February 1995.

9. Saigon 3502, 8 June 1966, job 92-649R, box 5, folder 71; Saigon 2071, 23 April 1966, Saigon 2616, 13 May 1966, FVSA 20218, 18 May 1966, all job 92-649R, box 3, folder 26.

10. Saigon 3793, 17 June 1966, job 92-649R, box 5, folder 71.

11. Hue 8113, 21 June 1966, job 92-649R, box 3, folder 26.

12. *Ibid.*; Saigon 3793.

13. U.S. Embassy airgram A-43, 30 July 1966, job 92-649R, box 4, folder 57;

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memorandum to Mr. De Silva, “Development of Middle Management Personnel in RD Program,” 15 June 1966, job 92-649R, box 5, folder 63. The memo noted the awesome difficulty of creating a competent staff in a new ministry responsible for an unfamiliar agenda in a besieged country lacking trained and efficient administrators.

14. Memorandum to Mr. De Silva, “PAT/RD Problems,” job 92-649R, box 5, folder 63.

15. FVSA 20410, 23 June 1966, job 92-649R, box 3, folder 26.

16. William E. Colby, memorandum to the director of Central Intelligence, “Mr. John Paul Vann—Criticisms of Vietnam PAT/RDC Program,” 17 June 1966, job 78-646R, box 1, folder 4.

17. *Ibid.* Just when Mai’s Dai Viet affiliation came to light is not known, but as early as 1964 CIA had, perhaps naively, endorsed Mai’s political ambition. It saw his recruitment of promising trainees as the possible prelude to the formation of a “Peasants’ Party” (see draft project outline, 31 December 1964, job 92-649R, box 1, folder 1).

18. Colby, “Mr. John Paul Vann.”

19. William E. Colby, memorandum to the director of Central Intelligence, “Station Comments on Mr. John Vann’s Criticisms of Vietnam PAT/RDC Program,” 25 June 1966, job 78-646, box 1, folder 4.

20. Chau interview, 26–28 April 1995.

21. *Ibid.*

22. *Ibid.*

23. Saigon 3587, 10 June 1966, and Saigon 5183, 30 July 1966, both job 92-649R, box 5, folder 61.

24. FVSA 19784, 14 February 1966, job 92-649R, box 5, folder 61.

25. Saigon 3686, 14 June 1966, job 92-649R, box 5, folder 71; FVSA 20439, 30 June 1966, and Saigon 3791, 17 June 1966, both job 92-649R, box 5, folder 65.

26. FVSW 9022, 24 June 1966, job 649R, box 3, folder 26; FVST 13058, 8 August 1966, job 92-649R, box 5, folder 61.

27. SAIG 0865, 16 March 1966, job 649R, box 2, folder 23. It appears that Jorgensen declined Be’s request, and that Be, like Chau, then turned to John Paul Vann. The station’s hesitation about working with Be at MRD became one of Vann’s criticisms when he visited Washington in June (see Colby, “Mr. John Paul Vann—Criticisms of Vietnam PAT/RDC Program”).

28. Chau interview, 26–28 April 1995; Saigon 5355, 4 August 1966, job 92-649R, box 5, folder 71.

29. Chau interview, 26–28 April 1995. Be’s relationship with the station may have been influenced by the accommodating attitude of his new boss. When General Thang came to Vung Tau to announce Be’s confirmation as permanent commandant, he used the occasion to tell the instructor staff that he had adopted the CIA approach as his own (Saigon 9046, 5 November 1966, job 92-649R, box 5, folder 61).

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30. FVSA 20410, 23 June 1966, job 92-649R, box 3, folder 26.
31. *Ibid.*; FVSA 20445, 1 July 1966, job 92-649R, box 3, folder 26. Hart's description of the new entity suggests that it would indeed have looked like a CIA proprietary, at least at the beginning.
32. FVSW 9022, 24 June 1966, and FVSW 9075, 14 July 1966, both job 92-649R, box 3, folder 26.
33. FVSW 9053, 6 July 1966, job 92-649R, box 3, folder 26.
34. Cooper et al., *The American Experience with Pacification*, 1:297; Hunt, *Pacification*, 76.
35. Director 21526, 20 July 1966, Director 24568, 1 August 1966, Saigon 5461, 8 August 1966, all job 92-6498R, box 5, folder 71.
36. FVSA 20418, 23 June 1966, job 92-649R, box 4, folder 42.
37. Director 19969, 14 July 1966, job 92-649R, box 2, folder 16.
38. R. W. Komer, memorandum to the president, "Second Komer Trip to Vietnam, 23–29 June 1966"; Peer De Silva, memorandum to the director, "Komer Report," 8 July 1966; George A. Carver Jr., "Comments on Mr. Komer's Report to the President on His 23–29 June Trip to Vietnam," 7 July 1966, all job 78-646R, box 1, folder 4.
39. Richard Helms, memorandum to the Honorable Robert W. Komer, "Report to the President on Your Recent Trip to Vietnam, 1 July 1966," job 78-646R, box 1, folder 4.
40. Donohue interview, 23 January 1995.
41. Saigon Embassy airgrams A-110, 29 August 1966, and A-43, 30 July 1966, both job 920649, box 4, folder 57.
42. Donohue interview, 23 January 1995. Of the difficulty of creating effective hamlet self-defense groups, Donohue added that "early warning techniques and vigilance training generally proved more effective." In this, he seems to make a virtue of necessity, as Stuart Methven did in his support of a similar approach by the Mountain Scouts.
43. U.S. Department of Defense, *Pentagon Papers*, 2:583–84.
44. Saigon Embassy airgram A-292, 7 December 1966, job 92-649R, box 4, folder 47.
45. *Ibid.*
46. Williams interview, 17 February 1995. Williams was assistant Vinh Binh Province officer from fall 1965 to spring 1966. An asterisk next to a name indicates a pseudonym for a CIA officer whose identity is still protected.
47. *Ibid.*
48. *Ibid.*
49. *Ibid.*
50. *Ibid.*
51. FVSA 21132, 28 October 1966, job 92-649R, box 3, folder 26; Saigon Embassy airgram A-292.
52. Williams interview, 17 February 1995.
53. Saigon Embassy telegram 17807, 11 February 1967, job 92-649R, box 5,

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folder 72; RDC monthly activity report, November 1967, job 92-649R, box 6, folder 76.

54. RDC monthly activity report, November 1967.

55. Saigon Embassy airgram A-287, 3 December 1966, job 92-649R, box 4, folder 47.

56. *Ibid.* As is often the case in such accounts, nothing is said here about any efforts, successful or otherwise, to enlist in their own defense the villagers assumed to want protection from the VC.

57. *Ibid.*

58. Hunt, *Pacification*, 134; Saigon 6068, 25 August 1966, job 92-649R, box 5, folder 63.

59. Saigon 6068; FVSA 21031, c. late September 1966, attachment 2, job 78-1829R, box 1, folder 9.

60. Saigon Embassy telegram 3429, 13 August 1966, job 92-649R, box 4, folder 47; emphasis added.

61. Bergerud, *The Dynamics of Defeat*, 159–61; Donohue interview, 23 January 1995.

62. John O'Reilly, memorandum for the record, "Review of COD Monthly Province Reports," 22 September 1966, job 92-649R, box 5, folder 65.

63. John T. McNaughton, untitled draft memorandum to the president, 22 September 1966, job 92-649R, box 5, folder 60; U.S. Department of Defense, *Pentagon Papers*, 2:348, cited in Bergerud, *The Dynamics of Defeat*, 162.

64. Hunt, *Pacification*, 75–77.

65. John Hart, memorandum to the deputy ambassador, "Evaluation of the Revolutionary Development Cadre Program, 22 September 1966," job 78-1829R, box 1, folder 9; Hunt, *Pacification*, 78–80, 83.

66. William E. Colby, memorandum to Mr. George Carver, SAVA, "McNamara Pacification Reorganization Proposal," 4 October 1966, job 78-646R, box 1, folder 4.

67. U.S. Department of Defense, *Pentagon Papers*, 2:594–98.

68. Charles L. Schultze and R. W. Komer, letter to Richard Helms, 9 August 1966, and Richard Helms, memorandum to the Honorable Charles L. Schultze and Mr. Robert W. Komer, "Rural Development Cadre Program in South Vietnam," 11 August 1966, both job 92-649R, box 2, folder 16.

69. Director 46772, 25 October 1966, job 649R, box 5, folder 67. Regarding earlier MACV reporting, George Allen recalled using U-2 photography, commissioned but not exploited by MACV, to show that some Long An Province hamlets certified as completed Strategic Hamlets by MACV, as of spring 1964, were in fact Viet Cong combat hamlets (see Allen interview, 9 March 1995).

70. Saigon 8762, 28 October 1966, job 92-649R, box 4, folder 44.

71. *Ibid.*

72. O'Reilly interview, 7 February 1995; Allen interview, 9 March 1995; Richard Helms, memorandum to deputy director for Plans, "Measuring Pacification Progress," 2 November 1966, job 78-646R, box 1, folder 4; George W. Allen, "The

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Indochina Wars, 1950–75” (manuscript 276-84, CIA History Staff; later published as *None So Blind* [Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2001]), 276–84. O’Reilly remarked on the excruciatingly detailed questionnaire that evolved from subsequent efforts to refine the reporting criteria.

73. Helms, “Measuring Pacification Progress.”

74. Allen interview, 9 March 1995. Allen recalled that, in mid-1967, SAVA (the office of the special assistant for Vietnam Affairs) engaged its own contractor to develop an automated data system capable of measuring the individual and collective effects of all the influences on pacification. Designed to take into account not only the programs themselves but environmental factors such as ARVN and enemy order of battle, air and artillery bombardments, and friendly ground operations, it was tested in one province, perhaps Long An, for three months. The results were promising, but Allen could not obtain the \$400,000 needed to develop the software, and the program died.

75. *Ibid.* Allen also found unproductive MACV’s later addition of a letter classification expressing degree of GVN control. What needed to be emphasized, in Allen’s view, was the extent of the VC presence, a phenomenon usually too complicated to be reduced to a letter grade.

76. *Ibid.*

77. Lewis Lapham, interview by the author, 29 April 1995, Tucson, AZ; memorandum of understanding, 10 February 1967, job 72-192R, box 2, folder 4.

78. Lapham interview, 29 April 1995; memorandum of understanding.

79. U.S. Department of Defense, *Pentagon Papers*, 2:614; Director 56142, 1 December 1966, job 92-649R, box 3, folder 26; FVST 14459, 24 December 1966, job 92-649R, box 2, folder 17. The FY 1967 budget for the RDC program relinquished to OCO management was \$52.4 million (see Director 66165, 12 January 1967, job 92-647R, box 2, folder 17).

80. Saigon 1093, 29 December 1966, job 92-649R, box 2, folder 17.

81. FVST 14478, 29 December 1966, job 92-649R, box 4, folder 47; U.S. Department of Defense, *Pentagon Papers*, 2:615.

82. Saigon Embassy telegram 9968, 3 November 1966, job 92-649R, box 5, folder 72.

83. FVSA 21229, 13 November 1966, job 92-649R, box 3, folder 26.

84. Director 48797, 1 November 1966, job 92-649R, box 5, folder 72. At this point, the station and the U.S. Mission had already abandoned a plan to double the production of RD cadres with a second training center, to have been located at Long Hai, up the coast from Vung Tau (see blind memorandum, “The Revolutionary Development Cadre Program,” c. late 1966, job 92-649R, box 2, folder 14).

85. FVSA 21234, 16 November 1966, job 92-649R, box 3, folder 26; memorandum by the author, “Reflections on CAB Provincial Reporting,” c. January 1966, job 92-649R, box 5, folder 61.

86. Blind memorandum, “Census-Grievance Program,” handwritten date June 1966, job 78-1990R, box 1, folder 11.

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87. Blind memorandum, “The Revolutionary Development Program,” c. October 1966, job 92-649R, box 2, folder 15.

88. John O’Reilly, memorandum to chief, FD/VNC and chief, FE/VNC/SV, “Present and Future of Course of the Counter Terror Program,” 4 August 1966, and Director 28061, 15 August 1966, job 92-649R, box 1, folder 1; Donohue interview, 23 January 1995.

89. Saigon 5424, 6 August 1966, job 92-649R, box 1, folder 1.

90. Director 28061, 15 August 1966, job 76-600R, box 3.

91. Saigon 5820, 18 August 1966, job 76-600R, box 3; FVSA 21053, 13 October 1966, job 92-649R, box 1, folder 1.

92. Job 72-192R, box 1, folder 8, *passim*.

11. CORDS

1. Saigon Embassy telegram 18123, 16 February 1967, job 92-649R, box 4, folder 57; Henry L. T. Koren, memorandum, “Revolutionary Development Guidelines for 1967,” 13 October 1966, job 72-192R, box 1, folder 8. Changes in pacification reporting criteria mean that actual progress on the ground may have been either more or less than the numbers indicate.

2. Richard Helms, memorandum to the Honorable Cyrus R. Vance, “Pacification Paper,” 18 February 1967, job 78-646R, box 1, folder 5. The language here implies that VC political expansion rested entirely on the use or the threat of force. The Rand studies cited in this work do indeed suggest an increasing reliance on coercion after the fall of Ngo Dinh Diem. Nevertheless, to believe, as many GVN and U.S. observers did, that the communist program had no positive appeal beyond mendacious propaganda makes an insoluble mystery of the movement’s perennial resilience.

3. RDC/P-5/67, January 1967, job 76-600R, box 1.

4. Memorandum to Major General J. A. McChristian, “Impact of Friendly Operations on VC Guerrillas and Infrastructures,” 8 March 1967, job 77-186R, box 1.

5. Helms, “Pacification Paper.”

6. *Ibid.*

7. Saigon Embassy airgram A-428, 7 February 1967; Saigon 3880, 13 March 1967; Saigon Embassy telegram 21875, 1 April 1967, all job 92-649R, box 5, folder 72.

8. Saigon Embassy telegram 21875, 1 April 1967; RDC/O-434, 8 July 1967, job 92-649R, box 3, folder 32.

9. Saigon Embassy airgram A-627; Saigon 5417, 19 April 1967, job 92-649R, box 2, folder 24.

10. Saigon 5429 and Saigon 5432, 19 April 1967, job 92-649R, box 2, folder 24.

11. Saigon 1653, job 92-649R, box 5, folder 63.

12. Koren, “Revolutionary Development Guidelines for 1967.”

13. *Ibid.*

14. *Ibid.* Both rhetoric and substance here are reminiscent of Ngo Dinh Nhu’s fanciful pronouncements during the last two years of the Diem regime.

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15. Ibid.
16. Saigon 9683, 23 November 1966, job 92-649R, box 2, folder 63.
17. Koren, “Revolutionary Development Guidelines for 1967”; Saigon 9683; John O’Reilly, memorandum for the record, “Review of COD Monthly IUO Reports,” 10 January 1967, job 92-649R, box 3, folder 26.
18. Saigon 9683.
19. O’Reilly, “Review of COD Monthly IUO Reports”; FVST 14403, 9 December 1966, job 92-649R, box 2, folder 14. The station office in charge of cadre (but not provincial police intelligence activity), the Covert Action Branch, became the Cadre Operations Division sometime in 1966.
20. O’Reilly, “Review of COD Monthly IUO Reports”; FVST 14403.
21. Saigon 1653.
22. Ralph Hudson, memorandum to ROIC and all provincial officers, “Motivation of the RD Cadres,” 24 January 1967, job 92-649R, box 5, folder 62.
23. Saigon Embassy telegram 18749, 23 February 1967, job 649R, box 2, folder 24; blind memorandum, “Revolutionary Development,” 20 April 1967, job 92-649R, box 4, folder 48. A covering memo by George Carver, dated 24 May, attributes it to DePuy.
24. Hunt, *Pacification*, 74, 85; memorandum for the record, “[Name omitted] Trip Report,” 1 May 1967, job 92-649R, box 5, folder 62.
25. David W. P. Elliott and W. A. Stewart, *Pacification and the Viet Cong System in Dinh Tuong: 1966–1967* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 1969), 64–66; FVST 23385, 24 August 1967, job 92-649R, box 4, folder 48. This dispatch forwards a MACV J-2 study of VC reaction to Revolutionary Development.
26. Hunt, *Pacification*, 85–87; *Who’s Who in America, 1968* (Chicago: Marquis, 1968); Lapham interview, 29 April 1995. As of April 1967, CIA was furnishing 45 percent of the OCO budget and 18 percent of its staff. USOM was providing nearly all of the rest (see “[Name omitted] Trip Report”).
27. Hunt, *Pacification*, 91; Lapham interview, 29 April 1995.
28. Hunt, *Pacification*, 88; Director 00599, 11 May 1967, job 92-649R, box 5, folder 60.
29. Hunt, *Pacification*, 98.
30. Clarke, *Advice and Support*, 211–12.
31. FVSW 9678, 9 June 1967, job 78-1990R, box 1, folder 1.
32. FVST 16656, 6 July 1967, job 78-1990R, box 1, folder 1.
33. Ibid. As of July 1967, the station had a total of 562 people, USOM about 2,000, and the U.S. military about 460,000. The State Department had approximately 230 and USIS some 120. About 10,000 of the military were engaged in intelligence work (see Richard Helms, memorandum to the president, “Transmittal of Vietnam Report,” 27 July 1967, job 78-646R, box 1, folder 5).
34. FVST 16656.
35. ROIC Bien Hoa, “June Monthly Report,” 30 June 1967, job 92-649R, box 1, folder 10.
36. Ibid.

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37. O'Reilly interview, 7 February 1995.
38. *Ibid.*; Saigon 5417, 19 April 1967, job 92-649R, box 2, folder 24.
39. Memorandum to chief, Vietnam Operations, "Cadre Programming," 28 September 1967, and *passim*, job 92-649R, box 2, folder 19. A MACV document dated 31 July 1967 put the annual attrition rate at 31 percent, calling it the lowest in history (see job 92-649R, box 1, folder 15). The program was at that point only fourteen months old, and this unattributed document has a "best foot forward" flavor that does not inspire confidence.
40. Ralph Hudson, memorandum to Colonel Vo Dai Khoi, "RD Cadres Who Absent Themselves Except on Pay Day," 6 June 1967, and memorandum to Khoi, "RD Cadre Desertion and Corruption," both job 92-649R, box 4, folder 52.
41. RDC/O-662, 9 September 1967, folder 34, and unsigned memorandum to Colonel Vo Dai Khoi, "Cutting Down on RDC Cadre Attrition Rate," 25 October 1967, folder 38, both job 92-649R, box 3.
42. Memorandum, chief, RDC/O to Colonel Vo Dai Khoi, "Steps to Be Taken to Overcome Attrition," 15 November 1967, job 92-649R, box 2, folder 19. Khoi's reply, if any, has not been found. The proliferation of memoranda to Colonel Khoi in the last half of 1967 suggests that communication by formal correspondence had to some extent replaced personal consultation between MRD and station officers in the RDC program.
43. TDCSDB 315/00041-68, 4 January 1968, job 92-649R, box 4, folder 49.
44. Lewis J. Lapham, memorandum for the record, "Talk with General Thang on November 30, 1967," n.d., job 92-649R, box 4, folder 53; memorandum SA/NTC-58, 9 December 1967, job 72-192R, box 2, folder 2; Hunt, *Pacification*, 101.
45. Ralph Hudson, memorandum to Colonel Vo Dai Khoi, "Selection of RD Cadre Group Leaders," 11 October 1967, job 92-649R, box 3, folder 38; Hunt, *Pacification*, 103.
46. FVSA 23522, 7 September 1967, job 92-649R, box 4, folder 49.
47. James D. Keyes, memorandum, "NTC Specialist Cadre Training" (Official Use Only), c. September 1967, job 72-192R, box 2, folder 1. As of September 1967, there were just ten American advisers at Vung Tau, working not only with RDC but with Census-Grievance and PRU (folder 1, *passim*).
48. RDC/O-655, 4 September 1967, attached to Douglas S. Blaufarb, memorandum to chief, Far East Division, "Political Content of the Vung Tau Training Course," 21 September 1967, job 72-192R, box 2, folder 1.
49. Nguyen Be, unpublished paper, "Contribution to the Vietnamese People's Struggle, or, Solution to the Vietnam War," October 1967, job 71-757R, box 1. No translator for this English-language version is credited. With respect to the impact of Be's subversive ideology, he seems not to have suffered any positive GVN reprisal, but he was, predictably, not rewarded either. As of 1972, he had not risen to the high position that many Americans thought his inspirational leadership merited. See Cooper et al., *The American Experience with Pacification*, 2:64.

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50. FVST 17656, 18 September 1967, job 92-649, box 2, folder 24.

51. *Ibid.*

52. *Ibid.* The concern at this time for greater GVN participation was shared by MACV. Westmoreland's deputy, General Creighton Abrams, urged U.S. commanders to launch more combined operations in which "the ARVN commander feels he is running the show." Abrams warned that if American officers continued to hold the Vietnamese at arm's length, "our cause here is helpless [*sic*]" (see Clarke, *Advice and Support*, 281–82).

53. FVST 17656.

54. Ralph Hudson, memorandum to Colonel Vo Dai Khoi, "Arbitrary Replacement of RD Control Group Officers from Saigon without Consulting Province Chief, RD Control Group Chief, or RD Permanent Board Chief," 10 November 1967, job 92-649R, box 3, folder 39.

55. Job 92-649R, box 3, folder 38.

56. *Ibid.*

57. FVST 17656.

58. FVSW 9993, 23 October 1967, job 92-649R, box 4, folder 49.

59. FVST 17656.

60. RDC monthly activity report, October 1967, job 92-649R, box 6, folder 76. The format and nomenclature indicate that this is a CIA, not a CORDS, report. With regard to the security issue, participants at the ROIC conference implicitly commented on the notion of a projection of RDC firepower from adjacent hamlets when they noted that attacking VC usually inflicted the most serious damage in the first few minutes, before reaction forces from the outside could arrive.

61. *Ibid.* Furthermore, ARVN battalions could not move without the approval of the division commander, whose responsibility for ARVN (but not RDC) casualties made him reluctant to approve night operations (see RDC/O-1080, 18 November 1967, job 92-649R, box 3, folder 34).

62. FVST 16656; blind memorandum, "U.S. Policies and Studies concerning Hamlet Self-Defense Forces," n.d., but apparently after August 1967, job 72-192R, box 2, folder 3 (this is one of a series of papers on hamlet defense that appears to have been prepared in Saigon).

63. RDC/O-766, 7 October 1967, job 92-649R, box 3, folder 34; RDC monthly activity report, November 1967. The embassy described the prime minister's decree of 24 December 1966 as "legitimizing" hamlet self-defense organizations, a word that does not convey a strong GVN commitment to the idea (see Saigon Embassy telegram 17807, 11 February 1967, job 92-649R, box 5, folder 72).

64. RDC monthly activity report, November 1967; RDC/O-823, 11 October 1967, job 92-649R, box 3, folder 38.

65. RDC monthly activity report, November 1967.

66. FVSA 24314, 18 December 1967, job 92-649R, box 4, folder 49.

67. *Ibid.*

68. FVSA 24407, 3 January 1968, job 92-649R, box 1, folder 10; FVSW 10311, 12 February 1968, job 92-649R, box 1, folder 2.

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69. RDC monthly activity report, November 1967.
70. RDC/O-896, 21 October 1967, job 92-649R, box 3, folder 34; RDC/O-1289, 23 December 1967, job 92-649R, box 6, folder 77.
71. MACCORDS (Military Assistance Command Civil Operations and Rural Development Support) notice 68-267, 6 February 1968, job 71-757R, box 1.
72. Unnumbered covert action report, 30 September 1967, job 92-649R, box 3, folder 30.
73. RDC monthly activity report, November 1967.
74. Ibid.
75. Ibid.; Hunt, *Pacification*, 139.
76. RDC/O-906, 23 October 1967, job 92-649R, box 3, folder 38.
77. Ibid.
78. Ibid.
79. RDC/O-524, 26 July 1967, job 92-649R, box 3, folder 37; Williams interview, 17 February 1995.
80. RDC/O-524, 26 July 1967; Williams interview, 17 February 1995.
81. RDC/O-524, 26 July 1967; Williams interview, 17 February 1995.
82. Williams interview, 17 February 1995.
83. Ibid. The centralization of authority at province level solved what Ralph Hudson called the main cause of disciplinary problems, a clear delineation between the powers of the district chief and those of the province chief (see RDC/O-924, 25 October 1967, job 92-649R, box 3, folder 37).
84. Williams interview, 17 February 1995.
85. Ibid. The Nungs, an ethnic minority originating in North Vietnam, had served the French against the Viet Minh, and many later drifted into the service of the Americans, mainly in security duty.
86. Ibid.
87. Ibid.
88. Ibid. Colonel Tin had been preceded by an American-educated civilian, also an intelligent, energetic man of serious purpose, although results during his tenure were apparently modest. Nevertheless, Quang Nam seems to have enjoyed more continuity of active leadership, at least during this period, than most provinces could expect to see (see *ibid.*).
89. Ibid.
90. Ibid.
91. Ibid.
92. RDC monthly activities report, August 1967, job 92-649R, box 6, folder 76.
93. Williams interview, 17 February 1995.
94. Ibid. Williams decided to spend the night with this exercise, and later recalled his pleasant surprise when he found that Tiger had managed to make up a passably comfortable bed. After they retired, a racket from the neighboring tent had them both reaching for their weapons until they realized they were hearing the complaints of the Vietnamese whose bedding Tiger had stolen.
95. Ibid.

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96. Ibid.

97. Ibid.

98. Ibid.

99. Ibid.

100. Hunt, *Pacification*, 112, refers to the effect of communist losses, in 1966 and 1967, on the effectiveness of the VC organization. The Rand studies cited in this volume contain many references from VC prisoners and defectors to the increasing harshness of VC dealings with the villagers, beginning in 1965.

101. RDC monthly activity report, August 1967, and RDC monthly activity report, October 1967, both job 92-649R, box 6, folder 76.

102. Memorandum to director, ICEX, “Hamlet Evaluation System,” 11 October 1967, job 76-600, box 3.

103. ROIC Bien Hoa, June monthly report, 30 June 1967, job 92-649R, box 1, folder 10.

104. RDC/O-1270, 16 December 1967, job 92-649R, box 6, folder 77; RD highlights, June 1967, job 92-649R, box 1, folder 10; RDC/O-578, 12 August 1967, job 92-649R, box 3, folder 33.

105. RDC/O-597, 19 August 1967, job 92-649R, box 3, folder 33.

106. RDC/O-1270; RDC/O-1164, 9 December 1967, job 92-649R, box 6, folder 77.

12. Phoenix

1. SAIG 2626, 21 November 1963, and SAIG 2650, 23 November 1963, both job 78-105R, box 1.

2. SAIG 2650; FVSA 17521, 10 June 1964, job 91-1076R, box 1, folder 12. The CIO’s nonmilitary intelligence responsibility did not, apparently, extend to the rural VCI. Agency analyst George Allen said he coined that term for a briefing at the Pentagon in 1963, where it was picked up and popularized by the later MACV J-3, Major General Richard Stilwell (Allen interview, 9 March 1995).

3. Cooper et al., *The American Experience with Pacification*, 2:91.

4. FVSA 17836, 7 September 1964, job 78-2162R, box 4, folder 1; FVSA 17279, 31 March 1964, job 91-1034R, box 1, folder 1.

5. Blind memorandum, “Current Status of Police, 4 March 1964”; FVSA 18057, 9 November 1964; FVSA 18322, 20 January 1965, all job 91-1076R, box 1, folder 12.

6. FVSA 17262, March 1964, job 78-2443R, box 2, folder 8; Cooper et al., *The American Experience with Pacification*, 2:91.

7. Allen interview, 9 March 1995.

8. Ibid. Allen recalled that McNamara insisted that the team include MACV’s intelligence efforts despite the refusal of then-JCS chairman Maxwell Taylor to let the military participate in the inspection.

9. FVSA 18630, 16 April 1965, job 78-2162R, box 4, folder 1; William E. Colby, memorandum to the assistant deputy director for Plans, “[Word omitted] Intelligence Liaison Projects,” 9 April 1965, job 92-649R, box 1, folder 1.

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10. SAIG 6279, 1 September 1965, job 91-1076R, box 1, folder 12.
11. SAIG 6284, 1 September 1965, job 91-1076R, box 1, folder 12.
12. SAIG 6780, 25 September 1965, and memorandum from the Office of the Special Assistant to the USOM director, A-1821, 5 January 1966, both job 91-1143R, box 5, folder 52. CIA support to the NPPF faded away in the spring of 1966. The organization seems never to have made a substantial contribution to pacification operations, partly because of poor coordination on the American side when its units reached the provinces (see memorandum, “Interrogation Facilities and Prisoner Exploitation in Vietnam,” August 1966, job 91-1143R, box 5, folder 52).
13. DIR 57811, 13 November 1965, job 92-649R, box 2, folder 16.
14. SAIG 7975, 17 November 1965, job 92-649R, box 2, folder 25.
15. Job 91-1143, box 5, folder 56, *passim*; Allen interview, 9 March 1995. Allen saw McChristian as focused on intelligence support to U.S. combat forces, not to pacification.
16. FVSA 19836, 24 February 1966; FVSA 20279, 2 June 1966; and FVSA 20320, 6 June 1966, all job 91-1143R, box 1, folder 11.
17. FVSA 19836, 24 February 1966, and FVSA 20196, 10 May 1966, both job 91-1143R, box 1, folder 11; FVSA 19955, 15 March 1966, job 91-1143R, box 5, folder 56; “Interrogation Facilities and Prisoner Exploitation in Vietnam.” FVSA 19955 says there were twenty-two PICs in March 1966; FVSA 20196 says there were eleven as of May.
18. Thomas Roberts, interview by the author, 28 February 1995. The MR was concerned with territorial security and pacification; it controlled militias and other local and irregular forces. The four corps commands, each of which coincided geographically with the corresponding MR, controlled the GVN’s regular forces: ARVN, the Marines, etc. At one point, Saigon and the surrounding area were designated MR 5, but there was no corresponding corps command.
19. FVSA 20808, 27 August 1966, job 91-1076R, box 1, folder 12.
20. Williams interview, 17 February 1995.
21. Blind memorandum, “District Intelligence Coordinating Center,” probably written by Walter Roberts, n.d., c. January 1967, job 71-797R, box 1; blind memorandum, “Origin, Objectives and Status of Phoenix/Phung Hoang Program,” n.d., job 76-600, box 2.
22. ROIC Bien Hoa, June monthly report, 30 June 1967.
23. Memorandum for the record, “ICEX Committee Meeting—20 January 1968,” job 91-1143R, box 3, folder 32.
24. Saigon 7238, 28 May 1967, job 77-186R, box 2; Evan J. Parker Jr. interview by the author, 16 February 1995, Potomac, MD. The district-level entity was first called the District Operational and Intelligence Coordination Center; the transposition of operations and intelligence took place in December 1967 at the behest of GVN police officials who wanted to avoid any suggestion that the new entity would be just another military-run operations center (see Saigon 5563, 9 December 1967, job 77-186R, box 1).

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25. R. W. Komer, memorandum to General Westmoreland, 14 June 1967, and blind memorandum, “Organizational Recommendations for Attack on VC Infrastructure,” 22 May 1967, both job 77-186R, box 1.

26. Komer, memorandum to General Westmoreland; “Organizational Recommendations for Attack on VC Infrastructure”; Parker interview, 16 February 1995.

27. Hunt, *Pacification*, 113–14; Komer, memorandum to General Westmoreland, 14 June 1967.

28. Parker interview, 16 February 1995. Observation on Parker’s style from Lapham interview, 29 April 1995. Self-effacement did not mean passivity, and Parker felt obliged to resist Komer’s tendency to accept casualty statistics as a reliable measure of pacification progress. Nevertheless, he later recalled that he enjoyed consistently civil treatment from Komer, who could be “brusque” and even “nasty” with other subordinates. Parker also recalled that Komer’s flamboyant style earned him some ridicule, as on the occasion when he arrived at a party in Saigon, after a trip to the provinces, in a shiny starched fatigue uniform. Someone standing within earshot of Komer inquired, “Who is that silly-looking twerp?” Parker also recalled that the station saw its pacification elements as cooperating with Komer, not as subordinate to him. Komer did not write the performance evaluations of the civilians detailed to him by other agencies.

29. Komer, memorandum to General Westmoreland, 14 June 1967; Parker interview, 16 February 1995; RDC monthly activity report, October 1967; Saigon 1287, 29 August 1967, job 77-186R, box 1.

30. Extract from a draft history, chap. 1, “History of Phung Hoang Program,” n.d., job 76-600R, box 1; Hunt, *Pacification*, 116.

31. FVSA 25159, 27 April 1968, job 91-1143R, box 3, folder 32.

32. Hunt, *Pacification*, 116–17. The vicissitudes of pacification nomenclature do not repay being traced in detail. A degree of uniformity was eventually achieved with the Provincial Intelligence and Operations Coordination Center and the DIOCC, supervised by the NICC.

33. Director, ICEX staff (Parker’s name excised), memorandum to acting chief of station, “Direct Station Involvement in the ICEX Program,” 10 December 1967, job 76-600R, box 3.

34. *Ibid.*; FVST 16656.

35. FVSW 9678.

36. Saigon 4763, 18 November 1967, job 77-186R, box 2.

37. *Ibid.*

38. *Ibid.*

39. Director 56592, 3 December 1967, job 77-186, box 2.

40. Job 92-649R, box 3, folder 34.

41. ROIC Bien Hoa, June monthly report, 30 June 1967.

42. *Ibid.*; ROIC Da Nang, “1st Corps Monthly Report for June 1967,” job 92-649R, box 1, folder 10.

43. ROIC Bien Hoa, June monthly report; ROIC Da Nang, “1st Corps Monthly Report for June 1967.”

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44. ROIC Bien Hoa, June monthly report, 30 June 1967.
45. Ibid.
46. FVSA 23319, 15 August 1967, job 92-649R, box 4, folder 57. Another point of pride was the egalitarian style that allowed subordinates to speak their mind without fear of reprisal. Not all agency supervisors, one assumes, were as thick-skinned as Bill Colby, but the author's experience as an agency employee confirms that Colby's capacity to absorb reproach from below was not unusual, at least at that time.
47. Ibid.
48. Ibid.
49. RDC/O-578, 12 August 1967, job 92-649R, box 3, folder 33.
50. Ibid.
51. FVST 16656.
52. Saigon 0994, 23 August 1967; FVSA 23400, 25 August 1967; and Saigon 0919, 21 August 1967, all job 78-1990R, box 1, folder 1.
53. FVSA 24337, 24 December 1967, job 92-649R, box 1, folder 10.
54. Ibid.
55. Ibid.
56. FVSA 21867, 17 February 1967, job 92-649R, box 1, folder 1. In this dispatch, the station described CIDG troops in I Corps as the "dregs of local jails," while in IV Corps they were "known to have openly indulged in thuggery of the worst sort."
57. Roberts interview, 28 February 1995.
58. FVSS 9013, 22 March 1967, job 92-649R, box 1, folder 2.
59. Saigon 6074, 3 May 1967, and Director 99086, 3 May 1967, both job 92-649R, box 1, folder 2.
60. FVSA 24366, 22 December 1967, job 92-649R, box 2, folder 10; Saigon 0242, 6 August 1967, job 92-649, box 2, folder 3.
61. Dale Andradé, *Ashes to Ashes: The Phoenix Program and the Vietnam War* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1990), 176–77; blind memorandum, "Revolutionary Development Cadre—August [1967]," job 92-649R, box 6, folder 76.
62. Blind memorandum, "Provincial Reconnaissance Units (PRU)," n.d., c. late 1967, job 92-649R, box 1, folder 4.
63. Vinh Binh Province covert action report for second quarter of 1967, n.d., job 92-649R, box 5, folder 69; FVSA 23032, 11 July 1967, job 92-649R, box 1, folder 10. Although the power of arrest was clearly required by the possibility of a military cease-fire, its practical effects in the circumstances of 1967 would have been limited. The inefficiencies of the South Vietnamese judicial system, and the short sentences imposed even on those whose cases were pursued, severely limited the impact of civilian justice on the VCI (see, e.g., Hunt, *Pacification*, 118).
64. ROIC Bien Hoa, June monthly report, 30 June 1967.
65. Blind memorandum, "Alleged Atrocities Committed by CIA Trained Vietnamese," n.d., job 92-649R, box 1, folder 8.
66. RDC/O-121/68, 24 February 1968, job 92-649R, box 6, folder 79.

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67. Ibid.
68. RDW/O-257, 10 June 1967, job 92-649R, box 3, folder 32.
69. FVSA 21976, 2 March 1967, job 92-649R, box 4, folder 48.
70. Job 92-649R, box 3, folders 32 and 33.
71. RDC/O-515, 22 July 1967, job 92-649R, box 3, folder 33.
72. RDC/O-425, 1 July 1967, job 92-649R, box 3, folder 32.
73. RDW/O-387, 24 June 1967, job 92-649R, box 3, folder 32; RDC/O-850, 14 October 1967, job 92-649R, box 3, folder 34; job 92-649R, box 6, folder 77.
74. RDC/O-766, 7 October 1967, job 92-649R, box 3, folder 34.
75. FVSA 23975, 13 November 1967, job 92-649R, box 1, folder 2.
76. Covert action report, RDC/O-211-67, 20 February 1967, job 92-649R, box 4, folder 69.
77. Ibid.
78. RDC/O-1164, 9 December 1967, job 92-649R, box 6, folder 77.
79. Saigon 6108, 22 December 1967, and Saigon 6898, 12 January 1968, both job 92-649R, box 1, folder 2.
80. Evan J. Parker, memorandum, "Project Takeoff Year End Report: Attack on VC Infrastructure," 4 January 1968, and undated, untitled briefing paper, apparently drafted c. late 1968 and possibly amended in early 1970, both job 77-186R, box 1.

13. The 1968 Tet Offensive and Accelerated Pacification

1. Clarke, *Advice and Support*, 307–8.
2. Hunt, *Pacification*, 131–32; TDCSDB 315/00091-68, January 1968. With Thang's departure, the Cadre Directorate of the Defense Ministry was sent back to the Ministry of Revolutionary Development, with consequent dilution of the progress Thang had made toward rationalizing territorial forces' support of RDC work (see FVST 20722, 20 June 1968, job 92-649R, box 4, folder 50).
3. R. Michael Pearce, *The Insurgent Environment* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 1969), 103–8. The interviews here were conducted over a two-year period ending in late 1967.
4. Thai and Quang, *People's Army*, 279–82. The self-contradictory description of the decision given in *People's Army* suggests an effort to conceal serious disagreement among members of the Politburo: "on the basis of guidelines for a protracted war, [we were] to step up our subjective efforts to the highest possible level in order to achieve decisive victory in a relatively short period of time," i.e., "during 1968."
5. Translation of Resolution 14 by Merle Pribbenow.
6. Thai and Quang, *People's Army*, 292; B. E. (Bob) Layton, interview by the author, 27 March 1995, Great Falls, VA. Layton served as an analyst of Vietnam affairs almost continuously from mid-1965 to 1976, including service in Saigon from mid-1967 to mid-1969.
7. Lewis Lapham, interview by the author, 29 June 1993, Tucson, AZ.

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8. Hunt, *Pacification*, 136; Victoria Pohle, *The Viet Cong in Saigon: Tactics and Objectives during the Tet Offensive* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 1969).

9. Blind memorandum, “Effect of VC Tet Offensive on RDC, PRU and SCG Programs,” 5 February 1968, job 92-649R, box 4, folder 49.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.

12. FVSA 24670, 18 February 1968, job 92-649R, box 4, folder 49; Lapham interview, 29 June 1993.

13. RDC/O-116/68, 16 February 1968, job 92-649R, box 6, folder 79; “Effect of VC Tet Offensive.”

14. Lapham interviews, 29 June 1993 and 29 April 1995.

15. Hunt, *Pacification*, 136–38.

16. Ibid., 138; RDC/O-116/68; FVSA 24668, 19 February 1968, job 92-649R, box 4, folder 49.

17. Hunt, *Pacification*, 136; memorandum to deputy to COMUSMACV for CORDS, 26 March 1968, job 92-649R, box 4, folder 49.

18. RDC/O-116/68; RDC/O-133/68, 9 March 1968, job 92-649R, box 6, folder 79; Race, *War Comes to Long An*, 249–50.

19. Karnow, *Vietnam*, 523; Cooper et al., *The American Experience with Pacification*, 2:17–18. No CIA or other U.S. government correspondence on the Tet offensive I have seen explores the unquestioned assumption that the communists would respect the Tet holidays. They had, in fact, launched the first major coordinated attack of the Second Indochina War at Tet in 1960.

20. Allen interview, 9 March 1995.

21. Layton interview, 27 March 1995.

22. RDC/O-121/68, 24 February 1968, job 92-649R, box 6, folder 79.

23. FVSA 24591, 27 March 1968, job 91-1143R, box 3, folder 32; FVSA 24842, 18 March 1968, job 91-1143R, box 1, folder 12.

24. “Phoenix Newsletter,” no. 68-2, 22 February 1968, job 77-186, box 1; FVSA 24591. The newsletter item about Tet intelligence is reticent about personal and place names in the manner of bureaucratic writing that seeks to escape assigning responsibility for a failure. It explicitly invokes the imperative of “avoiding unprofitable recriminations.”

25. Clarke, *Advice and Support*, 291–92.

26. Hunt, *Pacification*, 147.

27. RDC/O-223/68, 10 May 1968, job 92-649R, box 4, folder 54.

28. Ibid.; RDC/O-77/68, 20 January 1968, job 92-649R, box 4, folder 54.

29. RDC monthly activity report, May 1968, job 92-649R, box 6, folder 76.

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid.; RDC/O-105/68, 2 March 1968, job 92-649R, box 6, folder 79.

32. RDC monthly activity report, May 1968.

33. Ibid.

34. Ibid.

35. Ibid.

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36. Ibid.
37. Ibid.
38. Ibid.
39. Memorandum, SA/VTO 112, 8 July 1968, and passim, job 72-192R, box 2, folder 2.
40. FVSA 25674, 11 July 1968, job 92-649R, box 1, folder 10.
41. Robert W. Peart, memorandum to LTC Nguyen Tai Lam, “RD Cadre Groups Initial Entrance into a Hamlet,” 28 August 1968, job 92-649R, box 4, folder 54.
42. RDC monthly activity report, May 1968.
43. Ibid.
44. FVST 20722, 20 June 1968, job 92-649R, box 4, folder 50.
45. Ibid.
46. Ibid.
47. Ibid.
48. Director 11230, 25 June 1968, job 92-649R, box 4, folder 50.
49. Ibid.; Saigon 4573, 28 June 1968, and Saigon 4331, 22 June 1968, both job 92-649R, box 4, folder 50. Also see FVST 21024, 14 July 1968, job 92-649R, box 4, folder 51.
50. FVST 21024. Headquarters’ alarmed cable has not been found, but is liberally quoted in the station’s reply.
51. Ibid.
52. Ibid.
53. Director 17073, 17 July 1968, job 92-649R, box 4, folder 51.
54. Unsigned DCI briefing paper, “Status of Pacification in South Vietnam,” 17 July 1968, job 92-649R, box 4, folder 51. A covering note says, “From SAVA briefing book for DCI.” Also see Robert Peart, memorandum to all ROICs, “RDC Policy for 1968–1969,” 30 July 1968, job 78-1829R, box 1, folder 2.
55. Briefing paper, “Outline for Talk on Truong Son (Montagnard) RD Program,” c. mid-1968, job 71-7575R, box 1.
56. Ibid.
57. Hunt, *Pacification*, 153.
58. Ibid.
59. W. E. Colby, memorandum for the record, “Phoenix and Minister of Interior Khiem,” 21 June 1968, job 72-192, box 3. Press attention to Phung Hoang did not turn hostile until later. A 4 August 1968 *New York Times* article by William Beecher used a neutral tone in describing the program’s emphasis on district-level processing of intelligence.
60. Blind memorandum, “Phoenix Year End Report—1968,” 18 March 1969, job 77-186R, box 3.
61. Ibid.; *Roberts Street Journal*, 3 August 1995.
62. *Roberts Street Journal*, 3 August 1995; Clarke, *Advice and Support*, 362–63.
63. Hunt, *Pacification*, 201, 154–57.
64. Ibid.

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65. Ibid.
66. Ibid., 157; draft State Department telegram with covering note dated 10 October from George Carver to William Nelson, Colby's successor as chief, Far East Division, job 92-649R, box 6, folder 74.
67. Hunt, *Pacification*, 159, 135; Lapham interview, 29 April 1995. The quantitative goals of the APC included 3,000 members of the VCI neutralized during each month of the campaign. The GVN set this figure; Komer had recommended a less ambitious target of 2,000 (Hunt, *Pacification*, 158). As the APC got under way, Lew Lapham still saw inculcating peasant loyalty to the GVN as the essence of pacification. The way to do this was to give the peasantry "physical and emotional security" (Lapham interview, 29 April 1995).
68. FVST 21,532, 31 August 1968, job 92-649R, box 2, folder 21; Bergerud, *The Dynamics of Defeat*, 223–24, 234.
69. Bergerud, *The Dynamics of Defeat*, 223–24.
70. "Phoenix Newsletter," 23 December 1968, job 76-600, box 1.
71. TDCSDB 315/04007-68, 31 October 1968.
72. Ibid.
73. Ibid.
74. Hunt, *Pacification*, chaps. 11 and 12; Saigon 1625, 13 December 1968, job 92-649R, box 6, folder 74.
75. Saigon 1625; Hunt, *Pacification*, 201.
76. Hunt, *Pacification*, 198–99.
77. Saigon 1625; Colby, *Lost Victory*, 280.
78. Saigon 2571, 7 January 1969, job 92-649R, box 4, folder 51.
79. Ibid.
80. Clarke, *Advice and Support*, 345.
81. Ibid.
82. Hunt, *Pacification*, 202–3, 217–18.
83. Clarke, *Advice and Support*, 347–48.
84. Ibid., 347–49, 341.
85. Ibid., 351; Hunt, *Pacification*, 209; Summers, *Vietnam War Almanac*, 50.
86. MACV J-2, memorandum, "An Assessment of the Provisional Military Government," 26 October 1969, job 76-600R, box 1.

14. Disengagement

1. Hunt, *Pacification*, chap. 14.
2. Lapham interview, 29 April 1995; briefing papers, 22 March 1968, job 92-649R, box 2, folder 14; FVSA 25122, 21 April 1968, and FVSA 27311, 20 February 1969, both job 91-1076R, box 1, folder 13.
3. Director 88070, 29 March 1968, job 92-649R, box 5, folder 73; Thomas A. Donohue, telephone interview by the author, 23 May 1996; Douglas S. Blaufarb, memorandum to Mr. William E. Colby, "Continued CIA Responsibility for RDC Program in Vietnam," 29 February 1968, job 92-649R, box 4, folder 49.

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4. Director 88070, 29 March 1968, and Director 06593, 7 June 1968, both job 92-649R, box 5, folder 73, also folder 74, passim; Director 94032, 24 April 1968, job 92-649R, box 1, folder 2; memorandum to director of Central Intelligence, “Expansion of the Provincial Reconnaissance (PRU) Program,” 20 March 1968, job 82-51R, box 4, folder 4.

5. Director 29053, 29 August 1968, job 70-806R, box 1, folder 3.

6. Donohue interview, 23 May 1996.

7. Theodore Shackley, interview by the author, 26 June 1993, Sumner, MD; FVSA 27294, 20 February 1969, job 92-649R, box 4, folder 51.

8. Shackley interview, 26 June 1993; [Shackley’s Saigon deputy, name deleted], interview by the author, 14 June 1993, Fairfax, VA; Saigon 1762, 16 December 1968, job 92-649R, box 6, folder 74; Saigon 2294, 31 December 1968, job 92-649R, box 4, folder 51.

9. Director 62580, 31 December 1968, job 70-806R, box 1, folder 3.

10. FVST 23399, 18 February 1969, job 92-649R, box 2, folder 15; Saigon 4911, 26 February 1969, job 92-649R, box 4, folder 51. Director 86150, 21 March 1969; R. L. Bannerman, memorandum to general counsel, “Proposed RDC Funding Following the Turnover,” 2 April 1969; and John S. Warner, memorandum to deputy director for Support, “Proposed RDC Funding,” 3 April 1969, all job 76-600R, box 1.

11. FVSS 12589, 11 July 1968, job 92-649R, box 4, folder 51.

12. Colby, *Lost Victory*, chap. 16, especially 260–62; Hunt, *Pacification*, 196.

13. Colby, *Lost Victory*, 265–66.

14. Memorandum of conversation, “Conversation with Mr. Clayton McManaway,” 7 October 1968, job 92-649R, box 6, folder 74; transmittal manifest 1355, 15 October 1968, job 92-649R, box 2, folder 21. Colby’s book says nothing about capping RD Cadre deployments.

15. FVSA 27265, 18 February 1969, job 78-1990R, box 1, folder 1; FVSA 27826, 30 April 1969, job 92-649R, box 2, folder 14.

16. FVSA 27826.

17. Layton interview, 27 March 1995. The kindest thing Komer had to say about the piece was to call it a “SWAG,” i.e., a silly, wild-ass guess (Robert Layton, telephone interview by the author, 4 June 1996).

18. Saigon 6215, 24 March 1969, job 78-32R, box 1, folder 13.

19. *Ibid.*

20. *Ibid.*

21. FVSW 11349, 25 June 1969, job 78-1990R, box 1, folder 4.

22. FVSA 28491, 31 July 1969, job 78-1990R, box 1, folder 4.

23. Blind memorandum, 4 September 1969, with marginal note, “written for and passed to CFE for his use during Sept 69 Visit to SVN,” job 78-1990R, box 1, folder 1.

24. Saigon 5036, 6 October 1969, and FVSA 29148, 6 October 1969, both job 78-1990R, box 1, folder 2.

25. Saigon 5036; blind memorandum, 6 November 1969, job 78-1990R, box 1, folder 1.

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26. Addendum to Census-Grievance quarterly operational review, 27 October 1969, job 78-1990R, box 1, folder 4; Director 44791, 8 October 1969, and Saigon 9108, 19 January 1970, both job 78-1990R, box 1, folder 1. In a passage lined through in ink, a station draft of early 1970 says that “some GVN officials did show some interest in the continuation of the SCG program, however, Ambassador Bunker’s meeting and discussions with President Thieu brought all GVN interest to an end.” No other reference to U.S. discouragement of GVN interest in the program has been found (see draft dispatch, “Final Report—Static Census-Grievance,” c. February 1970, job 78-1990R, box 1, folder 4).

27. Director 63647, 6 January 1969, job 92-649R, box 6, folder 74; FVSA 27094, 4 February 1969, job 92-649R, box 4, folder 51. Not only agency records but Eric Bergerud’s *The Dynamics of Defeat*, dealing with Hau Nghia Province, and the work of U.S. Army historians suggest that VCI attrition in 1968 resulted at least as much from military operations as from the work of the DIOCCs working under the Phung Hoang rubric. The basis for the headquarters’ perception at that time is not known.

28. Director 63647; FVSA 27094.

29. Saigon 2685, 10 January 1969, job 76-600R, box 1.

30. Director 66839, 17 January 1969, job 76-600R, box 2; Director 69161, 27 January 1969, job 76-600R, box 1.

31. Saigon 3029, 19 January 1969, job 76-600R, box 1.

32. Walter Roberts, memorandum for the record, “Suggested Cable Reply on Station Proposal to Drop Phoenix,” 14 January 1969, job 76-600R, box 2.

33. FVST 23,400, 18 February 1969, job 76-600R, box 1.

34. Blind memorandum, “Phoenix Accomplishments January through June 1969,” n.d., job 72-192R, box 3; CORDS “Biweekly Report No. 29,” 22 September 1969, job 77-186R, box 3.

35. “Phoenix Accomplishments”; MACV CORDS, Phung Hoang (PH) program 1969 end of year report, n.d., job 76-600R, box 1.

36. Phung Hoang (PH) program 1969 end of year report.

37. “Phoenix Newsletter,” no. 70-2, 30 January 1970, job 77-186R, box 1. Postwar testimony from communist officials confirmed the damage inflicted by Phung Hoang. Among them was Nguyen Thi Dinh, a high-ranking woman VC functionary, who told Stanley Karnow that “we never feared a division of troops, but the infiltration of a couple of guys into our ranks created tremendous difficulties for us.” Other communist witnesses seem to have used Phung Hoang or Phoenix as a label for any post-Tet 1968 action, military or civilian, against the VCI. Nguyen Co Thach, Hanoi’s foreign minister after 1975, said it had “wiped out many of our bases” in South Vietnam and forced the withdrawal of many communist forces into refuge in Cambodia. See Karnow, *Vietnam*, 602.

38. “Phoenix Newsletter,” no. 69-7, 31 December 1969, job 77-186R, box 1.

39. Ibid.

40. Bergerud, *The Dynamics of Defeat*, 260–61.

41. Phung Hoang (PH) program 1969 end of year report.

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42. FVSA 29698, 1 December 1969, job 78-32R, box 1, folder 15; Summers, *Vietnam War Almanac*, 52.
43. Director 71822, 4 February 1969, and FVSA 27094, 2 February 1969, both job 92-649R, box 4, folder 51.
44. Ralph W. Johnson, memorandum for the record, “Trip Report—South Vietnam, 18 May–2 June 1969,” 16 June 1969, and Can Tho 2129, 27 May 1968, both job 77-186R, box 2.
45. FVSA 28469 (as corrected on first page from FVSA 28427), 18 July 1969, job 91-1143R, box 1, folder 13.
46. William J. Greenwalt, memorandum to Phoenix military personnel, “Professionalism,” 12 October 1968, job 77-186R, box 1.
47. *Ibid.*; FVSA 27,311, 20 February 1969, job 91-1076R, box 1, folder 13.
48. FVSA 25,122, 21 April 1968, job 91-1076, box 1, folder 13.
49. *Ibid.*; blind memorandum, “Special Police Program,” with marginal note “Aug 68 for DCI,” job 91-1143R, box 1, folder 12.
50. Saigon 5528, 10 March 1969, job 76-600R, box 1; Saigon 1655, 13 December 1968, job 91-1143R, box 5, folder 57.
51. Saigon 5528; Saigon 1655.
52. FVSA 27825, 25 April 1969, job 91-1076R, box 1, folder 13.
53. Peer De Silva, memorandum to assistant deputy director for Plans, “Project Renewal,” 1 July 1969, job 91-1076R, box 1, folder 13.
54. *Ibid.*
55. *Ibid.*
56. FVST 22573, 17 December 1968, job 76-600, box 1; FVSA 26852, 23 December 1968, job 92-649R, box 1, folder 10.
57. FVSA 26852.
58. *Ibid.*; Director 69161.
59. Director 69161; Saigon 2684, 10 January 1969, job 92-649R, box 4, folder 51.
60. FVSA 27630, 1 April 1969, and *passim*, job 92-649R, box 1, folder 11; blind memorandum, “The Provincial Reconnaissance Unit Program (Feb–March 1969),” n.d., job 92-649R, box 1, folder 4.
61. Undated document extract filed with material dated July to August 1969, job 92-649R, box 1, folder 4; FVSA 28,468, 29 July 1969, job 92-0649R, box 1, folder 11.
62. Unsigned handwritten note, 1 August [1969], and Peer De Silva, memorandum to assistant deputy director for Plans, “Renewal of [C-G project] for Fiscal Year 1970,” 25 July 1969, both job 92-649R, box 1, folder 4.
63. De Silva, “Renewal of [C-G project] for Fiscal Year 1970.”
64. William E. Nelson, memorandum, “Utilization of American PRU Advisers,” 13 October 1969, job 92-649R, box 1, folder 4.
65. Blind memorandum, “The Phoenix and Provincial Reconnaissance Unit Programs,” 16 December 1969, job 76-849R, box 1, folder 10. A covering note is signed by Carver. The memorandum ends on a disingenuous note, asserting that the “PRU are completely under Vietnamese control.” To say this was to take a formality for an operative fact.

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66. Headquarters 372, 6 November 1969, and Stanley Resor, memorandum to the secretary of Defense, “The Phoenix and Provincial Reconnaissance Unit Programs in Vietnam,” 20 October 1969, both job 76-849R, box 1, folder 10.

67. Headquarters 372.

68. Ibid.

69. Ibid.

70. George A. Carver Jr., memorandum to the Honorable Melvin R. Laird, “The Phoenix Program,” 22 October 1969, job 82-51R, box 5, folder 4.

71. Saigon 6160, 4 November 1969, job 76-600R, box 2; job 92-649R, box 1, folder 5. Not until March 1970, using the good offices of a cooperative senator, was the station able to get the case against the PRU cadres dismissed (see FVSA 30787, 13 March 1970, job 92-649R, box 1, folder 11).

72. Ronald Spector, *After Tet: The Bloodiest Year in Vietnam* (New York: Free Press, 1993), 287–88.

73. Saigon 6596, 13 November 1969, job 92-649R, box 1, folder 4; Saigon 803, 13 November 1969, job 82-51R, box 5, folder 4.

74. Richard Helms, memorandum to the deputy director for Plans, “PRU Program in Vietnam,” 13 November 1969, job 76-849R, box 1, folder 10.

75. FVST 26066, 14 November 1969, job 92-649R, box 1, folder 4.

76. Ibid.

77. Ibid.; Saigon 7587, 8 December 1969, job 82-51R, box 5, folder 4. The station’s estimate later dropped to \$5.2 million (see FVS 31216, 21 April 1970, job 92-649R, box 1, folder 5).

78. Saigon 7587; Saigon 9946, 12 February 1970, job 76-849R, box 1, folder 10.

79. Saigon 9946; Director 62860, 24 December 1969, job 76-849R, box 1, folder 10; Director 000757, 7 January 1970, job 76-600R, box 1; [C-G project] quarterly operational review, 1 October–31 December 1969, job 92-649R, box 1, folder 12.

80. Saigon 9946.

81. [C-G project] quarterly operational review, 1 October–31 December 1969; Director 006448, 30 January 1970, job 76-849R, box 1, folder 10; Saigon 9946.

82. FVSW 11890, 10 March 1970, and *passim*, job 92-649R, box 1, folder 11.

83. FVSA 31016, 30 March 1970, job 92-649R, box 1, folder 4; FVSA 31035, 3 April 1970, job 92-649R, box 1, folder 11.

84. FVSA 31016; FVSA 31035.

85. FVSA 31389, 7 May 1970, job 92-649R, box 1, folder 11.

86. FVST 29076, 17 October 1970, and Kenneth Knaus, memorandum to chief, Vietnam Operations, “Provincial Reconnaissance Units (PRU),” 30 October 1970, both job 92-649R, box 1, folder 11.

87. FVSA 31232, 21 April 1970, job 92-649R, box 1, folder 11.

88. Extract from Saigon 0558, 2 March 1970, job 92-649R, box 1, folder 4.

89. Ibid. Colby’s treatment of this subject in *Lost Victory*, 280–81, is almost identical.

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90. Extract from Saigon 0558. Colby's description of this initiative has it arising in a request from Prime Minister Khiem to Deputy Ambassador Samuel Berger, who assigned action to Colby and Shackley (see memorandum for the record, "Meeting with Ambassador Colby regarding the Phoenix/Phung Hoang Program," 13 April 1970, job 76-600R, box 2).

91. Extract from Saigon 0558.

92. FVSA 31216, 21 April 1970, job 92-649R, box 1, folder 4.

93. Draft headquarters cable, 16 March 1970, job 91-1076R, box 1, folder 13; "Phoenix Newsletter," no. 70-5, 6 May 1970, job 72-197R, box 3.

94. Bergerud, *The Dynamics of Defeat*, 248–51.

95. Donald Gregg, interview by the author, 13 September 1995, Washington, DC.

96. Ibid.

97. "Phoenix Newsletter," no. 70-5.

98. Ibid.

99. Ibid.; Saigon Embassy telegram 4013, 18 March 1970, job 77-186A, box 1.

100. Memorandum for the record, "Preparation for Viet Cong Political Struggle," 8 April 1970, job 91-1076R, box 1, folder 13.

101. Gregg interview, 13 September 1995.

102. Ibid.

103. Ibid.

104. Ibid.

105. Saigon 15303, 25 June 1970, job 80-106A, box 3, folder 5.

106. Ibid.

107. Cooper et al., *The American Experience with Pacification*, 2:21–22.

108. Saigon 15303.

109. Robert Komer, unsigned draft report, "Vietnam Revisited," c. 30 July 1970, job 77-186R, box 2. This document reflects Komer's identification of pacification with physical security. He had, apparently, never understood the political and motivational core of the PAT/RD Cadre concept, saying in this piece that its purpose was to provide "village security" at a time when the military neglected this. At the time of writing, with military forces dispersed in the countryside, the teams were "no longer needed."

110. R. W. Komer, draft report, "The Phung Hoang Fiasco," 30 July 1970, job 77-186R, box 2.

111. Ibid.

112. Ibid.

113. W. E. Colby, Letter to Mr. R. W. Komer, 17 October 1970, and draft blind memorandum, c. October 1970, both job 76-200, box 2.

114. R. W. Komer, letter to the Honorable William E. Colby, 18 November 1970, job 76-600R, box 2; emphasis in original.

115. Draft blind memorandum, "Comments on NSC [National Security Council] Ad Hoc Committee Paper 'The South Vietnamese Government's Political and Administrative Performance,'" n.d., job 76-600R, box 2; draft blind memorandum, "Renewed CIA Participation in the Phung Hoang Program," 7 December

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1970, job 76-600R, box 1; Komer, “The Phung Hoang Fiasco”; Saigon 23285, 13 December 1970, job 76-600R, box 2.

116. Saigon 23285.

117. Saigon 16335, 20 July 1970, job 91-1143R, box 5, folder 58.

15. A Matter of Running City Hall

1. Race, *War Comes to Long An*, 268–69.

2. *Ibid.*, 269–71.

3. Saigon 16183, 16 July 1970, job 92-649R, box 1, folder 5.

4. Director 086715, 13 November, 1970; FVSS 18369, 9 November 1970; Saigon 21696, 11 November 1970; Saigon 21969, 17 November 1970; Saigon 22268, 22 November 1970, all job 92-649R, box 1, folder 5. Also see job 76-600R.

5. FVSA 34963, 13 April 1971, job 92-649R, box 1, folder 5.

6. Saigon 25757, 9 February 1971, job 92-649R, box 1, folder 11.

7. *Ibid.*

8. Saigon 34246, 20 July 1971, job 76-600R, box 2.

9. *Ibid.*

10. FVSA 30164, 15 January 1971, job 76-600R, box 2; Saigon Embassy telegram 0622, 14 January 1971, job 77-186R, box 1; FVSA 36163, 31 July 1971, and FVSA 35639, 6 June 1971, both job 91-1143R, box 4, folder 44; FVSA 37422, 1 December 1971, job 91-1143R, box 4, folder 45. The PRU director lasted only two months longer. When the station became persuaded of his “malpractice and corruption,” it lobbied for his removal (see Saigon 40966, 29 November 1971, job 92-649R, box 1, folder 13).

11. Saigon 26867, 1 March 1971, job 92-649R, box 1, folder 11; FVSA 36163.

12. FVSA 35639; FVSA 36163; FVSA 36791, 14 October 1971, job 76-600R, box 2.

13. T. A. Donohue, draft memorandum, “Effectiveness of Projected Police Programs against the VCI,” two versions, dated 23 April and 17 June 1971, job 76-600R, box 1.

14. *Ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*

16. Donald Gregg, interview by the author, 13 March 1995, Washington, DC.

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*

19. MACV telegram DTG 150148Z October 1971, job 77-186R, box 1.

20. *Ibid.*; Saigon 37978, 27 September 1971, job 92-649R, box 1, folder 13.

21. MACV telegram DTG 270727Z November 1971, job 76-600R, box 2; Director 299430, 10 August 1972, and FVSA 39198, 21 August 1972, both job 91-1143R, box 4, folder 47.

22. Blind memorandum, “MR 3 Monthly Report for December 1971,” 4 January 1972, copy courtesy of Donald Gregg.

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23. *Ibid.*

24. Theodore Shackley, interview by the author, 13 July 1993, Sumner, MD.

25. Philip Potter, memorandum for the record, “Meeting with National Police Commissioner Nguyen Khac Binh,” n.d., job 92-649R, box 1, folder 5; Saigon 51007, 28 June 1972, job 80-106A, box 2, folder 6.

26. Saigon 51131, 1 July 1972, job 80-106A, box 2, folder 6. Polgar’s proclivity to dismiss the VCI threat to GVN ascendancy in the countryside arose partly from his mistaken understanding that the 1968 Tet offensive had sparked a popular uprising of a kind entirely absent during the Easter offensive. See Thomas Polgar, interview by the author, 29–30 July 1993, Maitland, FL, in which he restated his perception of an insignificant VCI: “In large part . . . because much of the Viet Cong infrastructure was destroyed between 1968 and 1972, it was obvious that only the North Vietnamese Army stood in [the] way of stability in South Vietnam, just as the expulsion of the North Korean Army from South Korea permitted economic and social development in the latter.”

27. Hunt, *Pacification*, 255–56.

28. Thai and Quang, *People’s Army*, 389; Hunt, *Pacification*, 247; Allen interview, 9 March 1995; FVSA 39198.

29. Saigon 48241, 2 May 1972, job 77-186, box 2; Saigon 51617, 13 July 1972, job 92-649R, box 1, folder 13; “MR 3 Monthly Operations Report, May 1972,” 5 June 1972, courtesy of Donald Gregg.

30. FVST 34572, 12 July 1972, job 92-649R, box 1, folder 13; Saigon 51617.

31. Hunt, *Pacification*, 255; Saigon Embassy telegram 6211, 1 May 1972, job 77-186R, box 1; FVSA 39198.

32. “MR 3 Monthly Operations Report, June 1972,” 14 July 1972, courtesy of Donald Gregg; FVSA 39198; Bergerud, *The Dynamics of Defeat*, 312, 318.

33. Blind memorandum, “15 September Meeting Between the CIA Station Chief in Vietnam and Prime Minister Tran Thien Khiem,” 19 September 1972, Khiem dossier; FVSA 39198. Thieu once remarked to Colby that he thought Diem “had run the country quite well,” and Colby took this as an acknowledgment of the two presidents’ similar styles (Colby, *Lost Victory*, 294).

34. Saigon 55420, 6 October 1972, job 77-186R, box 2; FVSA 39198; Hunt, *Pacification*, 247. In June 1973, the station estimated a VCI of 45,000 to 50,000 people, and doubted that even COSVN knew for sure how many cadres were still active (see Saigon 64752, 2 June 1973, job 77-186R, box 2). There was persistent controversy over the scoring of neutralization actions. Although Phung Hoang was more an intelligence coordination mechanism than an autonomous action arm, it appears that some GVN and U.S. commanders tended to acknowledge the Phung Hoang intelligence contribution only when the information was exploited by assets, such as PRU and the National Police Field Force, under direct district or province control.

35. FVST 33360, 18 February 1972, and FVSA 39235, 2 September 1972, both job 92-649R, box 1, folder 5; blind memorandum, “The Provincial Reconnaissance Program,” job 82-51, box 5, folder 4.

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36. FVST 34572; FVSA 39235; Saigon 59265, 19 January 1973, job 92-649R, box 1, folder 5; Saigon 59927, 6 February 1973, and Danang 24950, 2 February 1973, both job 91-1143R, box 2, folder 18.
37. FVST 34572; FVSA 39235; Saigon 59265; Saigon 59927; Danang 24950.
38. Saigon 65982, 2 July 1973, job 78-806R, box 1.
39. Saigon 64486, 26 May 1973, job 76-600R, box 2.
40. Ibid.
41. Saigon 64998, 8 June 1973, job 78-806R, box 1; Saigon 75451, 28 February 1974, job 81-336R, box 1, folder 7.
42. COB Bien Hoa memorandum to COS, Vietnam, "Police Special Branch Report," 17 July 1973; Can Tho, "Police Special Branch Quarterly Report 1 April–30 June 1973," 11 July 1973; and Nha Trang, "Special Branch Operations Quarterly Progress Report," 27 June 1973, all job 91-1143R, box 2, folder 18.
43. Layton interview, 27 March 1995.
44. Bien Hoa 28354, 9 November 1974.
45. Summers, *Vietnam War Almanac*, 58–59.
46. A detailed account of the last weeks of the Saigon government is contained in David Butler, *The Fall of Saigon* (London: Sphere Books, 1986).

Conclusion

1. Peer De Silva relied exclusively on the coercion model of VC operation: "The Vietcong had only one inducement to offer the peasantry to make them cooperative: the use or threat of terror" (De Silva, *Sub Rosa*, 226).
2. The tendency to reduce the VC to an abstraction can occasionally be found even in the Rand studies, most of which aim at illuminating the relationship between the VCI and the rural population (see W. P. Davison, *Some Observations on Viet Cong Operations in the Villages* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 1968)).
3. Nathan Leites, *The Viet Cong Style of Politics* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 1969), xixff. Also see Davison, *Some Observations*, and Donnell, *Viet Cong Recruitment*, on the subjects of VC recruitment and governing practices. Another useful study in the Rand series is M. Anderson et al., *Insurgent Organization and Operations: A Case Study of the Viet Cong in the Delta, 1964–1966* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 1967).
4. Leites, *The Viet Cong Style of Politics*.
5. John A. McCone, letter to the president, 31 March 1965, job 82-51R, box 5, folder 4. Rostow's thinking is encapsulated in his book *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). Most, if not all, field case officers, as well as managers such as William Colby and Lewis Lapham, believed in economic development as a motivating device. See Colby, *Lost Victory*, and Lapham interview, 29 April 1995.
6. George A. Carver, "Why We Are in Vietnam," n.d., c. 1967, job 71-757, box 1.

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7. A *Pentagon Papers* historian commented on this solicitude for the interests of Saigon's governing class, attributing it to the traditional American reverence for property, "especially that of foreigners well disposed toward us, reinforced by the postwar specter of 'socialism'" (U.S. Department of Defense, *Pentagon Papers*, 1:28–29).

8. Karnow, *Vietnam*, 106, 223–24.

9. Colby, *Lost Victory*, 305, contains one of numerous examples. Also see Robert Komer, *Bureaucracy at War: U.S. Performance in the Vietnam Conflict* (Boulder: Westview, 1986), xiii.

10. Helms, "Pacification Paper." U.S. advisers in Hau Nghia Province came to think that GVN functionaries there anticipated a communist victory, and were trimming their sails accordingly (Bergerud, *The Dynamics of Defeat*, 304). The VC, by contrast, exhibited an extraordinary capacity to make tiny, incremental contributions to a cause that sanctified any means to the millennial end. A Rand study cites as an example the half-dozen VC who during the Diem era noisily crossed and recrossed a bridge at night to persuade neighboring villagers that the area harbored an imposing communist military presence. A comparably labor-intensive tactic on the GVN side, then or later, is difficult to imagine.

11. The lack of rigor is evident also in the absence of a definition for the term *insurgency* as it applied to the movement in the South. It surely mattered whether the Viet Minh/Viet Cong represented a Moscow/Beijing surrogate, Vietnamese anticolonialism, peasant alienation from the GVN, North Vietnamese hegemony in Indochina, or some blend of two or more of these, but sporadic argument about the matter never led to a working—much less a definitive—conclusion.

12. The November 1968 report of General Abrams's Long-Range Planning Task Group, which became the basis of MACV strategic planning, recommended abandoning mobile operations in favor of territorial security under the "one-war" rubric, but it did not address the basis of communist influence among the peasantry. See Hunt, *Pacification*, 212–13.

13. According to an army historian, even General Abrams, much more interested in pacification than was General Westmoreland, did little to express this interest with changes in the way his forces were deployed (Hunt, *Pacification*, chap. 14, and Clarke, *Advice and Support*, 507–8). In any case, Abrams's main task soon became Vietnamization, i.e., withdrawal, rather than finding and pursuing a way to win the war.

14. The Clandestine Service ethos, reflecting its Office of Strategic Services origins, always preferred action to reflection, and an elite, "special" unit or organization as the locus even of an overt, essentially conventional, kind of operation. The inertness of GVN line agencies encouraged the station to indulge this proclivity until the sheer size of its programs forced them into a more traditional format.

15. Peer De Silva made perhaps the most explicit statement of the exploitive purpose of good works. In his mind, the motivational effort of the People's Action Team had as its sole purpose to elicit from the villagers the information on the Viet Cong that he assumed they possessed (see De Silva, *Sub Rosa*, 227). The CIA's

recurring temptation to use the Census-Grievance program simply as an intelligence collection mechanism stemmed from the same mentality. But exploitive motives are hard to conceal, and it seems likely that peasant sensitivity to them was one factor limiting the success of even the most benevolent programs.

16. U.S. Army commanders' impulse to minimize the military significance of part-time combatants and civilian support elements meant that MACV was inclined to see VC irregulars as a lesser threat than they appeared to those, mostly civilians, who saw them as representing an important combat capability and an indispensable support mechanism for regular forces. This disagreement produced the 1967 conflict over VC order of battle statistics that gained notoriety from its coverage by CBS television. MACV's arbitrarily restricted estimates had more to do with public relations and domestic U.S. politics than with the conduct of the war. CIA correspondence on the pacification programs makes no mention of it, and it seems not to have affected the conduct of those programs (see Harold P. Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers: Three Episodes, 1962–1968* [Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 1998], "Episode 3, 1967–1968: CIA, the Order-of-Battle Controversy, and the Tet Offensive").

17. Race, *War Comes to Long An*, 272–73; Herring, *America's Longest War*, 231. Race notes that the GVN's 1970 land reform essentially ratified the redistribution carried out over the years by the VC. Some defectors saw gratitude to the GVN as akin to thanking a thief for returning stolen property.

18. RDC/O-21/68, 6 January 1968, job 92-649R, box 6, folder 78. The twin themes of security and economic gain as the pillars of CIA and overall U.S. pacification strategy are most explicitly stated in Lapham interview, 29 April 1995.

19. Saigon 51007, 28 June 1972, job 80-106A, box 2, folder 6. Bob Layton, a longtime Vietnam analyst, is one of those who noted the reliance on the "control" criterion of pacification. As early as the mid-1960s, during my own service in Vietnam, the frustration provoked by the enduring uncertainty over peasant motivation gave rise to the contemptuous yet despairing expression, "Grab 'em by the balls, and their hearts and minds will follow."

20. President Johnson exemplified the persisting confusion on this point in a November 1967 press conference at which he boasted of increasing numbers of peasants under "free control" (quoted in Bergerud, *The Dynamics of Defeat*, 193). Several students of the war have commented on the sterility of the control criterion, most cogently Jeffrey Race in *War Comes to Long An*.

21. Clarke, *Advice and Support*, 273.

22. The bias of the Lansdale station, which produced optimistic but inconclusive reporting, complicates the question of evaluating peasant attitudes in 1955. Lansdale's officers adopted his faith in the ability of a benevolent military to evoke the peasant's assumed anticommunism, a conviction Lansdale had acquired in the Philippines. They may thus have been influenced by what they expected to see. For the effect of the armed struggle policy on the GVN presence at village and hamlet level, see Race, *War Comes to Long An*, chap. 3.

23. Hunt, *Pacification*, 263–66. While CIA tried to square the circle, motivat-

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ing peasant leaders to serve an archaic, inequitable system, MACV simply made a virtue of necessity, accepting the GVN's exclusionary practice and erecting a facade of leadership training for the educated class that monopolized the officer corps: "If leaders could not be inducted into the officer corps, then the officers would be made into leaders" (Clarke, *Advice and Support*, 513-14).

24. Komer, *Bureaucracy at War*, 21-22.

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