WHY DID THE STRATEGIC HAMLET PROGRAM FAIL?

A thesis presented to the Faculty of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

MASTER OF MILITARY ART AND SCIENCE

by

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B.A. (Military Studies),
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Over the period from 1961 to 1963 the Government of Vietnam introduced the Strategic Hamlet Program, which was designed to be the central part of a comprehensive plan to pacify South Vietnam. Pacification was to be achieved by isolating the rural population from the Viet Cong communist guerrillas. The aims of the Strategic Hamlet Program were expressed as security, economic development, social advancement, and political participation. By instituting reforms the Government of Vietnam believed that it could win the allegiance of the people and thus defeat the VietCong.

The Strategic Hamlet Program eventually failed because of inadequate planning and coordination, inadequate resources, an unrealistic timetable, problems with siting and construction, and inadequate and falsified evaluation procedures. In addition there was a lack of commitment to the program, especially from President Diem. Another factor contributing to the failure of the program was the impatience and intolerance of the United States towards the government of President Diem. Above all, the peasants, who had been identified as the focus in the war against the insurgents, rejected the program because the promised reforms did not materialize amid the corruption and bureaucratic inefficieny associated with the implementation of the program.

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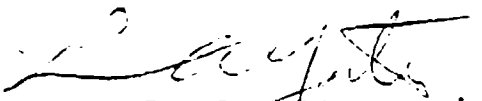

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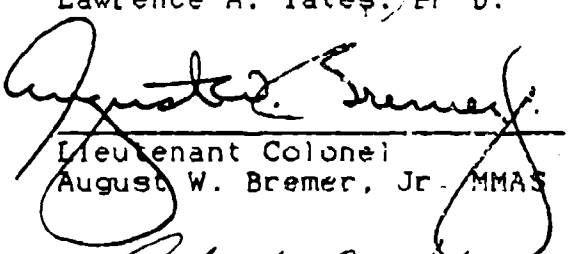

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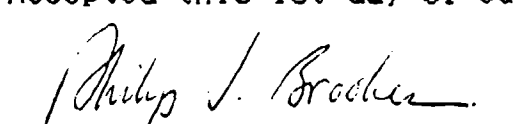

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ABSTRACT

WHY DID THE STRATEGIC HAMLET PROGRAM FAIL?: A study to determine the reasons for the failure of the Strategic Hamlet Program in South Vietnam, by Lieutenant Colonel Peter F. Leahy, Australian Army, 184 pages.

Over the period from 1961 to 1963 the Government of Vietnam introduced the Strategic Hamlet Program, which was designed to be the central part of a comprehensive plan to pacify South Vietnam. Pacification was to be achieved by isolating the rural population from the Viet Cong communist guerillas. The aims of the Strategic Hamlet Program were expressed as security, economic development, social advancement, and political participation. By instituting reforms the Government of Vietnam believed that it could win the allegiance of the people and thus defeat the Viet Cong.

The Strategic Hamlet Program eventually failed because of inadequate planning and coordination, inadequate resources, an unrealistic timetable, problems with siting and construction, and inadequate and falsified evaluation procedures. In addition there was a lack of commitment to the program, especially from President Diem. Another factor contributing to the failure of the program was the impatience and intolerance of the United States towards the government of President Diem. Above all, the peasants, who had been identified as the focus in the war against the insurgents, rejected the program because the promised reforms did not materialize amid the corruption and bureaucratic inefficency associated with the implementation of the program.

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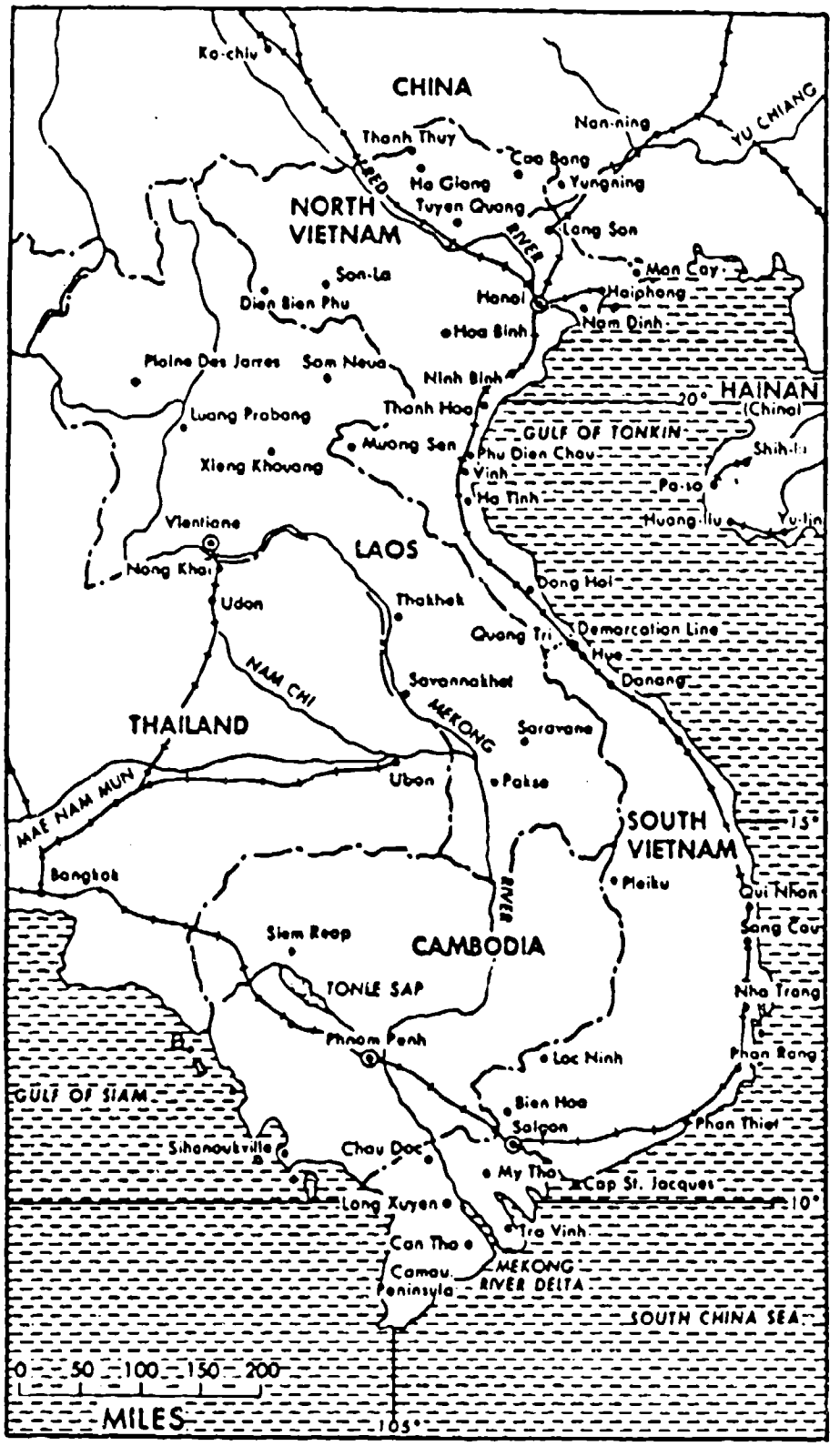


Source: Marvin E Gettleman and others, Vietnam And America: A Documented History (New York: Grove Press Inc. 1985), Title Page.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This is a study of pacification in Vietnam from 1961 to 1963. Over these three years the Government of the Republic of Vietnam introduced and supported the Strategic Hamlet Program. This program became the Government of Vietnam's "major ideological and institutional tool in attempting to generate popular consensus in support of its efforts to defeat the enemy."[1] The strategic hamlets were the major component of a comprehensive campaign to bring peace to South Vietnam by isolating the rural population from the Viet Cong guerillas.

While largely seen as a military activity, the most significant impact of the Strategic Hamlet Program was intended to occur beyond the military sphere. President Ngo Dinh Diem and his brother and adviser Ngo Dinh Nhu, expected that the strategic hamlets would bring about fundamental changes in the nature of South Vietnamese society. In his President's message on National Day 1962, President Diem proclaimed:

> The Strategic Hamlet is indeed also and primarily the point of impact of a political and social revolution which will serve as the foundation for our economic revolution.[2]

This theme of an all-encompassing program was reiterated in July of 1963, when President Diem referred to the "total revolution policy of the strategic hamlets."[3] By the end of 1963, Diem was dead and his "total revolution" was in disarray. By all appearances, the Strategic Hamlet Program had failed. This study will examine the different security, economic, social, and political components of the Strategic Hamlet Program to determine why it failed.

DEFINITIONS

In this study Pacification, literally meaning to reduce to a state of peace, will refer to all of the efforts by the Government of Vietnam to restore and maintain law and order in the countryside. Pacification programs should seek to provide sustained protection for the rural population from insurgent threats. At the same time, a pacification program should aim to engender support for the government by meeting the needs of the people. In concept a pacification program should be a civil, as well as a military project, properly coordinated, carefully planned, and adequately resourced. Just as the South Vietnamese and the United States did, this study assumes pacification to be a viable counterinsurgency strategy.

Some authors, such as U.S. Army officer and historian, Rod Paschall, have suggested that economic development may not be essential to the success of a counterinsurgency effort. Paschall argues that some insurgencies have been put down solely by brute force.[4]

This takes a limited view of pacification, neglecting both the long term view and the importance of the social and political components of a pacification program in favour of an approach based solely on security and economic measures. Properly coordinated and adequately resourced pacification programs remain a government's best course of action in overcoming an insurgency, because they combine all of the elements of power available to a government in a single campaign.

The Strategic Hamlet Program was the primary focus of South Vietnamese efforts to pacify the country. The Government of Vietnam received extensive advice and assistance from the United States and the United Kingdom as it implemented the program. In the process, the strategic hamlets came to mean different things to those involved. President Diem saw them as the point of impact of a revolution. Ngo Dinh Nhu said that the objective was "to assure security of the people in order that the success of the political, social and military revolution might be assured by an enthusiastic movement of solidarity and self-sufficiency."[5]

Robert Thompson, the former Secretary of Defence in Malaya, was appointed the head of the British Advisory Mission to Vietnam in 1961, and became a key adviser to President Diem. Thompson gave three main objectives to be achieved through the Strategic Hamlet Program. The first was to protect the population, a prerequisite for the other

two objectives: to unite the people and involve them in positive action on the side of the government; and to provide development in social, economic, and political fields.[6]

The American view of the program, stated in the U.S. Military Assistance Command Vietnam Special Report Number 1, was that the objectives included "all civil-military measures necessary to gain or maintain security and population control and establish effectively presence of government among people."[7]

Insurgency refers to the subversive and violent actions of an organized movement that has as its aim the removal of an existing government. In South Vietnam over this period, the insurgency involved the actions of the National Liberation Front under the general and increasing direction of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. The insurgents in South Vietnam fought a "people's war" characterized by a nucleus of peasant support, a commitment to a protracted conflict, direction by a trained cadre, and overall control of the insurgency effort by the party organization.[8] As Douglas Blaufarb explained, the Vietnamese Communists refined the concept of people's war to include both a strategy of operating against the domestic political vulnerabilities of the South Vietnamese allies and an increased reliance upon terrorism.[9]

Counterinsurgency refers to the actions of a government to defeat an insurgency. Actions taken may

include various combinations of activities to ensure security by the use of military and paramilitary forces, as well as political, social, economic, and psychological programs.

Clear and hold operations are counterinsurgency operations in which security forces move into a disputed area and secure it for subsequent action by the government to bring about economic, social, and political reform. The security forces remain in the area to provide protection and to ensure that the insurgent forces cannot reassert their influence. Over time, security force numbers may be reduced or regular force units may be replaced by less well-trained and equipped local force militia units.

Search and destroy operations are operations in which security forces move into a disputed area for a limited time in order to seek out and decisively engage insurgent forces. Once the mission is accomplished the security forces withdraw, and the area may return to insurgent control.

FAILURE

This thesis assumes the Strategic Hamlet Program failed. In order to detail the reasons for this failure, the Strategic Hamlet Program will be assessed in terms of the stated objectives, which were to attain security, economic development, social mobilization, and political participation. Security measures, to be conducted by the police and military forces, were designed to protect the populace and to create an infrastructure for popular

counterguerilla action. Economic advancement was to be achieved through the development of rural industries, cooperative institutions, and the full development of local resources. Social mobilization was to be achieved through a new scale of civic values based on a new ideology called "personalism" and through individual dedication to the common good. Political participation was to be achieved through the reintroduction of democracy in the villages which would include involvement of the villagers in local government.

While assuming the failure of the Strategic Hamlet Program, the thesis will also consider successes in the areas detailed above. Failure is assumed because the program did not survive intact beyond early 1964. It should be recognized, that not all elements of the program failed uniformly. In some areas credible success was achieved, while in others admirable and substantial gains were made.

ASSESSING PACIFICATION IN THE REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM

Using the stated objectives of the Government of Vietnam the performance of the strategic hamlets will be assessed based on two criteria: first, whether government efforts to isolate and protect the rural population from the Viet Cong were successful; second, the ability of the government to win the support of the peasants. The consideration of both questions is important as, by itself, isolation of the peasant, or of the insurgent, is an inadequate aim. The government must at the same time win

the willing and continued support of the peasant through economic, social, and political programs.

ENDNOTES

[1]Information Report, "Analysis of the Strategic Hamlet Program and of the Montagnard Situation in South Vietnam." Central Intelligence Agency, Report Number TDCSDE-3/650,769, 16 July 1962, in Paul Kesaris, ed., CIA Research Reports Vietnam and Southeast Asia 1946-76, (microfilm: Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1983), reel III, frame 0250.

[2]Ngo Dinh Diem, Address to the National Assembly, 1 October 1962, in The Times of Vietnam Magazine, 28 October 1962, Volume IV, Number 43: 7,

[3]Ngo Dinh Diem, Message to the Nation, 7 July 1963, in "How We Foil the Communist Strategy in South Vietnam," The Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces, 6 and 7, September and October 1963, (Saigon: Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces).

[4]Rod Paschall, "Marxist Counterinsurgencies." Parameters Volume XVI, Number 2, Summer 1986, 3.

[5]Gene Gregory, "The Strategic Hamlet: Edifice of Revolution," The Times of Vietnam Magazine, 28 October 1962. Volume IV, Number 43: 6.

[6]Robert Thompson, Defeating Communist Insurgency (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1966), 125.

[7]Message, USMACV Special Report Number 1, "Province Rehabilitation Program," 8 September 1962, in Declassified Documents Retrospective Collection, Part One, Volume 1 (microfiche: Washington, D.C.: Carrollton Press, 1976), 80A.

[8]Douglas S. Blaufarb, The Counterinsurgency Era (New York: The Free Press, 1977), 11.

[9]Ibid, 12.

CHAPTER 2

THE REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM

Rural life in Vietnam in the early 1960s was much as it had been for centuries, despite almost continual domination by one foreign power or another. One enduring constant throughout Vietnamese history, a constant that would continually thwart government efforts at pacification, was the nature of both the village and the next lowest administrative unit, the hamlet. While an informal association, the village was a strong and viable organization. The village was largely self-sufficient with its own social, legal, economic, and political life.

During the 1950s and the early 1960s changes began occurring that altered the pattern of traditional village life. Strong forces were at work on the entire society of South Vietnam, and these forces drastically altered the way of life of the peasants, presenting them as the point of focus in the struggle for the control of the country.

GEOGRAPHY AND CLIMATE

Situated at the southeastern tip of the Asian mainland, Vietnam has two major geographic features. They are the deltas of the Red River and the Mekong River. The

majority of the population lives in these two fertile plains. Separating these two plains is a narrow coastal plain, which broadens south of the 17th parallel, the line of partition separating Communist from non-Communist Vietnam.

In the Republic of Vietnam, to the south of the 17th Parallel, where this study is concentrated, the coastal plain broadens to the south of Saigon as it opens out into the Mekong Delta and Camau Peninsula at the extreme south of the country. To the west are the mountains and high plateaus of the Annamite Mountain Range, which forms the border between South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. These mountains run to within 50 miles to the north-east of Saigon, where they rapidly dissipate into the great fertile plains of the Mekong Delta.

The climate of the region is tropical, producing jungles as well as a flourishing environment for rubber trees. In the flat and fertile delta region, rice was an abundant crop as was the bamboo, which farmers used to supplement their incomes when the rice crop failed.

DEMOGRAPHY

The population of the Republic of Vietnam in 1962 was estimated at 14.2 million.[1] Of these, approximately 670,000 were of the highland tribal groups of the Bahnar, Rhade, and Jhari people, who made up the most important ethnic minority. These people, collectively known as the Montagnards, occupied the strategic Central Highlands.

Other sizable groups were the Cambodians, Chinese, and French. The remaining 85% were ethnic Vietnamese. As a result of the 1954 Geneva Agreements, which partitioned Vietnam, over 800,000 refugees migrated from communist-held North Vietnam. Many of these refugees were Catholics who settled in and around Saigon and the Delta area to the south.[2]

The major cities were Hue, Da Nang, and the capital, Saigon. Most of the people were concentrated in the Mekong Delta and the lowland regions of the central plains.

SOCIETY

Social organizations in the Republic of Vietnam in the early 1960s were deeply marked by historical, religious, and ethnic factors. The name Indochina itself gives some indication of the diversity of the area, as it aptly describes the meeting place of Indian and Chinese influence. Due to historical pre-eminence Chinese influence was dominant, providing the country with Confucian attitudes, Buddhism, and tight social organizations.

Two very strong elements of this tight social organization were the family and the village. The vast majority of Vietnamese lived a traditional life, making their livelihood from agriculture. According to Frances Fitzgerald, "the traditional Vietnamese lived by constant repetition, by the sowing and reaping of rice and by the perpetuation of customary law."[3] With only three major cities, occupied largely by government administrators and

merchants (predominantly Chinese), there were significant divisions between city dwellers and the majority of the population in the countryside. Used to an insular and traditional life, the peasants resented outside control, change, and manipulation with which they associated the urban elites.

Colonial influence was a significant factor in shaping the socio-economic conditions evident in 1961. The French viewed Indochina as a source of raw materials and as a market for manufactured goods. French governments concentrated on supporting this colonial economy and paid little regard to developing representative government or to accommodating Vietnamese interests. Little was done to develop the country, and political organizations and trade unions were not allowed. As a result there was no system for airing grievances. Bernard Fall credits this shortcoming with giving "rise to a great deal of underground organizing to the profit of the Communists, who were most skilled in that kind of activity."[4]

Another significant legacy of French rule was that the country was left with very few capable and experienced administrators. Under colonial rule, French administrators were employed as far down as provincial level. Vietnamese were denied admission to the civil service, except for those given access to the lower ranks.[5]

The French also denied the very existence of Vietnam, seeing it only as three of the five states of French

Indochina. At this time Indochina comprised the states of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. The French view accentuated the differences between the three states of Vietnam, which were Tonkin (north), Annam (centre), and Cochinchina (south). As Diem sought to consolidate power after the departure of the French, these differences were to become an important factor. Joseph J. Zasloff, Professor of Political Science at the University of Saigon observed:

> President Diem and his family come from Hue, the former capital of the Center, and many of his key bureaucrats are from the Center also, or from the North. Thus to the Southern peasantry, the regime that succeeded French rule still to some extent seems an alien one.[6]

HISTORY

Throughout its history Vietnam had been dominated by one foreign power or another. The Chinese were dominant from A.D. 111, although at times the Kingdom, which was then known as Nam-Viet, was able to break free of Chinese control. French interest, which began with missionaries and traders in the late 16th century, was formalized in 1887, when the Indochinese Union was proclaimed.

During World War II, Vietnam was occupied by the Japanese. During the war a nominally nationalist organization known as the Viet Minh league was founded by the Communists, with the Moscow-trained Ho Chi Minh as its leader. In August 1945, with the defeat of the Japanese, the Viet Minh seized power and deposed Bao Dai, the Emperor of Annam. On 2 September 1945, Ho Chi Minh declared

independence for the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. With the return of the French and their efforts to reclaim their colony, sporadic fighting broke out as both sides sought to pursue their competing claims to the country. The First Indochina War, which was to last 8 years, began in earnest when Viet Minh forces attacked Hanoi on 19 December 1946.

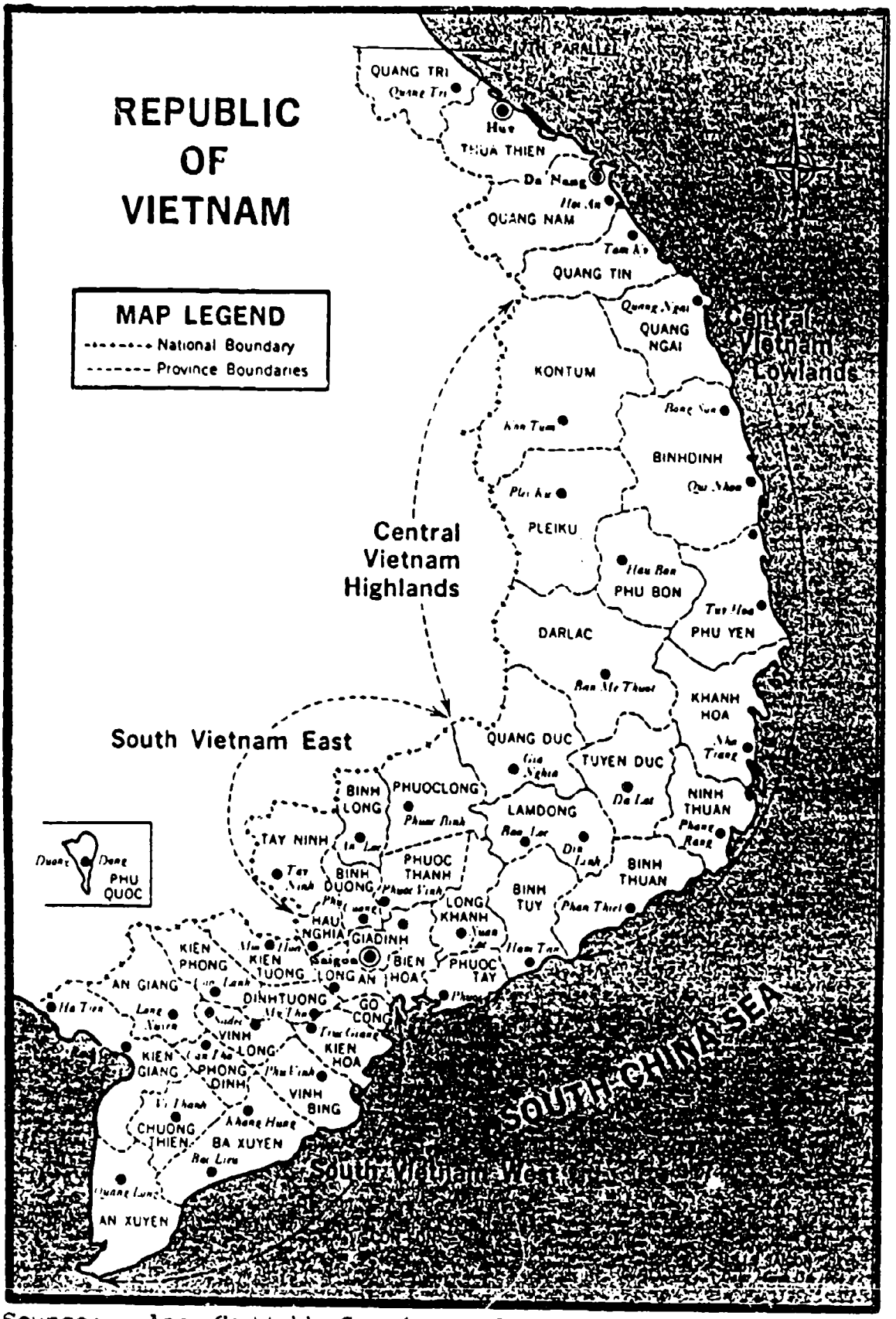
The war reached its conclusion when the French garrison at Dien Bien Phu surrendered in May 1954 after a 56-day siege. This major strategic defeat signalled the effective end of French colonial rule. Hostilities ended formally with an agreement concluded on 20 July 1954 at the Geneva Conference. This and other agreements called for treaties of independence and association, the withdrawal of troops, and an international commission to control and supervise the provisions of the agreement. Of over-riding significance was the temporary partition of Vietnam at the 17th parallel until nationwide elections on the issue of reunification could take place in July 1956.

In the south, on 7 June 1954, the Emperor Bao Dai invited Ngo Dinh Diem to become Prime Minister. The choice of Diem was based on his anti-communist attitude and the fact that he was not tainted by a close association with the French. Diem promptly declined to participate in the elections for reunification. His decision was fully supported by the United States government which, by this time, was providing ever-increasing levels of assistance.[7] Diem deposed Bao Dai on 23 October 1955 in a referendum and

became President of the newly-proclaimed Republic of Vietnam. Vietnam thus became two separate countries divided at the 17th parallel.

THE GOVERNMENT OF VIETNAM

Shortly after the creation of the Republic of Vietnam, a new constitution was promulgated in October 1956. The constitution provided for executive power to be vested in the President with legislative power wielded in a single chamber National Assembly. The system of government was to be unitary in that the constitution provided only for a central government. For administrative purposes, the country was divided into 38 provinces and 4 municipalities. The municipalities were Hue, Da Nang, Dalat, and the Prefecture of Saigon. They were independent of the surrounding provinces and maintained direct contact with the central government. The provinces were made up of districts, cantons, villages, and hamlets.[8] For administrative reasons, primarily for inspection and coordination of provincial activities by the Department of the Interior and the Presidency, the provinces were grouped into 4 regions: Central Vietnam Lowlands, South Vietnam East, South Vietnam West, and Central Vietnam Highlands. The administrative structure of South Vietnam to provincial level is shown on the map on page 16.



Source: Ann Caddell Crawford, Customs and Traditions of Vietnam (Rutland: Charles E. Tuttle Co.: Publishers), Frontsplece.

Under the constitution, a strong presidential system was established. Diem was particularly adept at using this system, by maintaining control over day-to-day government affairs either himself or through a very close circle of advisers. Within the executive branch, the province appeared only as an administrative unit, created by the President and operated under his jurisdiction. Each province was headed by a Province Chief who was appointed by the President. Jason L. Trinkle and Tran Van Dinh explained the powers of the province chief in the following terms: "The Province chief derives his power directly from the Presidency and the only limits to his authority are those imposed by it."[9]

In 1960, 21 of the 38 province chiefs held military rank.[10] Dennis Duncanson assessed this policy of appointing military officers as provincial chiefs as weakening the administration, rather than strengthening it, as was intended. The more difficult, and in the long term the more important, administrative problems were delegated to subordinates while the officers dealt with military problems. Military province chiefs were inexperienced, appointed for short duration, prone to corruption, and susceptible to interference by area commanders who were superior in military rank.[11]

As a direct link between Saigon and the subordinate administrative units, the province chief occupied a pivotal position by controlling regional military forces, as well as

budgetary and administrative matters. The province chief was also responsible for the enforcement of national laws within his province, the maintenance of order and security, and village administration. The power of the province chief was explained by Lloyd W. Woodruff as "In fact, the chief executive for all administrative affairs in the province."[12]

Administratively, the district was directly below the province and was headed by a district chief who was appointed by the central government. A similar administrative unit to the district was the canton. The cantons were not found uniformly throughout Vietnam, but were nevertheless an important body. The cantons were similar to the district, but their importance had become much diminished. Neither the district nor the canton was a legal body, and the district chief carried out his duties in the name of the province chief. The district chief was responsible for the general supervision of the lower administrative units and for the provision and coordination of services within his district. The 38 provinces were divided up into a total of 209 districts. The canton chief was appointed to perform liaison between the villages and the district, as well as with the provincial administrative agencies. The duties of the canton chief were spelled out in Presidential Ordinance 57-a, dated 24 October 1956.[13] Woodruff observed that, by 1961, the districts were taking over the functions of the cantons: the cantons were playing

a decreasing role: and as a result, the government was contemplating their elimination.[14]

As the unit of government administration closest to the rural population, the village played a vitally important role in Vietnamese social organization. The districts were divided up into 2,579 villages. In times past, the villagers lived an isolated life, rarely coming into contact with higher government authorities. By 1961 this independence was decreasing and the village was becoming ...ct to a great degree of centralized administration. In ...oodruff observed, "No longer does the village enjoy much autonomy."[15]

By contrast, Finkle and Tran Van Dinh, while identifying change, observed that Vietnam's historical background worked against change. They held that the village was more than an administrative unit. To them it was a social, economic, and spiritual unity which commanded loyalty from its members. The significance of this observation lies in the conclusion they drew:

> While Viet Nam is no longer a "federation of villages," no government can afford to ignore the deep attachment of the individual Vietnamese to his traditional village. In many respects, the village is the key to the future of Vietnam.[16]

Prior to the Presidential directive on administrative structure, village councils had been elected. In an effort to minimize the possibility of Viet Cong infiltration as well as to link village administration with national policy,

Diem replaced the elected village councils with appointed councils. The province chief appointed all members of the village council and directly administered the council. The council generally consisted of a village chief, a police chief, and a finance official. All were collectively involved in major activities such as law enforcement, tax collection, health, justice, and public works. In the Camau Peninsula area, three special commissioners were added to assist in anti-Communist activities. They were responsible for political affairs, information programs and the youth.[17] Other administrative bodies found in the village included the village self-defence guard, the hamlet self-defence corps, farmers' organizations and a local branch of the major political party, the National Revolutionary Movement.

While Finkle and Tran Van Dinh identified the village as the key to the future of Viet Nam, it was the hamlet that was selected as the battleground between the government and the Viet Cong. Diem and his key advisers were intent on using the hamlet as the means for achieving security and development in the countryside. Woodruff quoted an unnamed Secretary of the Interior as believing that the hamlet was the "real unit that can get things done."[18]

It is disconcerting then to find that the hamlet, far from being a viable political and economic entity, had no legal statutory basis. It was not even mentioned in the Presidential Ordinance Number 57-a of 24 October 1956, which dealt with administrative reorganization in Vietnam.

Woodruff was unable to offer an adequate definition and had extreme difficulty in describing a typical hamlet. Robert Scigliano offered little more, but did proffer:

> Since the advent of the Republic, hamlet chiefs have been appointed by district chiefs generally on the recommendation of the village chiefs. Like the village officials, hamlet chiefs are salaried officials, and their main duties are to maintain order within their jurisdictions and carry out the instructions which come from district, provincial, or, often, from Saigon agencies.[19]

What is clear is that a village was made up of a number of hamlets based on either social or administrative functions. Woodruff noted there were 16,398 hamlets in 1962. They varied widely in population from a very few to many thousands. In the rural areas of the south, the population of the hamlets tended to be between 500 and 1,000. In the cities and larger villages, hamlets were much larger and there was little to indicate where one began and another ended. Even though it is difficult to define a typical hamlet, they remained a constant in Vietnamese society and were an important factor in shaping everyday life for the majority of Vietnamese. Pham Chung confirmed this importance:

> Through political upheavals and many other changes, the structure of the hamlet has retained its essential character. It is the functioning and consistency of the organization of this basic unit which determine to a great extent the course of human and social activities of the nation.[20]

PRESIDENT NGO DINH DIEM

In 1961, Vice President Johnson characterized President Diem as the Winston Churchill of Asia. Many Vietnamese did not agree. Whatever the feelings towards Diem were, there is no denying that he played an immensely important role during his time as President of the Republic of Vietnam.

Diem, a Catholic, came from Hue in Central Vietnam. He had been involved in government during the 1930s, first as a province chief and then as Minister of the Interior. He had later resigned, disenchanted with French efforts at reform. During the early 1950s, he travelled widely and returned to Vietnam from America to be appointed Prime Minister by Bao Dai in June 1954. After the withdrawal of the Viet Minh and the French, he was presented with both a virtual political vacuum and a country in chaos. With ever-increasing levels of U.S. support, the new President quickly and resolutely set about consolidating power and providing for the needs of his country. His first challenges were from dissidents within the armed forces and the formidable Cao Dai and Hoa Hao reformist Buddhist sects. These sects were associated with the French and had been involved in the running of the country under French rule. Against significant odds, Diem prevailed by persuasion, political deals, and the use of force when necessary. After a referendum in October 1956, he proclaimed himself President. Dennis J. Duncanson, who was a member of the

British Advisory Mission to South Vietnam, added another factor:

> ...all seemed to the people to show that Ngo Dinh Diem's horoscope was a lucky one: the conviction was clinched by the unreserved support, moral and financial, of the US, from which so many urban Vietnamese hoped to benefit.[21]

Without a doubt, Diem was a patriot and a nationalist who faced the immense task of developing the Republic of Vietnam. As he would do again later, he turned to the idea of a revolution. He wanted to establish a new society through a revolution he labeled "personalism." At best, personalism was a strange and confusing fusion of philosophies. The doctrine, while based on christianity, claimed an independent view that pointed "the way of duty which is also the way of true liberty."[22] This concept of duty to the state suited the Confucian view of Diem and Nhu: and, with the guidance of Nhu, it was enthusiastically adopted as a means of enlisting popular support in the fight against Communism. Diem and Nhu took personalist principles and combined them with Confucian and Catholic traditions to come up with a doctrine that "sanctioned social discipline and political constraint in the name of a nobler liberty."[23] In the view of Diem it was ideally suited to the times, but as William A. Nighswonger remarked:

> Personalism is considered by Vietnamese and western students to be a confusing amalgam of traditions, neither understood or practiced outside the Ngo family.[24]

Diem's style of governing was to be his undoing. More and more he began to behave like a mandarin as dissidents were repressed and opposition political activity was denied. He became increasingly autocratic and utterly convinced that the course he had undertaken was for the benefit of the Republic of Vietnam. Diem and his government became increasingly isolated from the people. This was not only because of Diem's view of himself as a mandarin. Diem and many of the ruling class were Catholic, educated and urban. This contrasted strongly with the vast majority of the population, who were Buddhist, un-educated, and rural dwellers, who often lived a subsistence existence. The influence of his family and the predominance of northern Catholics in government was resented by the people. Nighswonger observed:

> There was much talk of revolution, democracy and the dignity of man, but the behaviour of the regime towards the citizenry, and particularly minority political leaders, was often the opposite of the edifying words.[25]

At first opposition was limited to politicians and intellectuals. After 1957 and an unsuccessful coup attempt, dissension became more and more strident, only serving to prompt the President to seek to protect his position by appointing trusted and sycophantic functionaries to government positions. Opposition was aggressively repressed and, as a result, the political process became polarized. One was either for Diem or against him: there was no middle

ground. The civil service became demoralized and corruption increased. As the Viet Cong threat increased, the government became more and more isolated from the people. As Bui Diem, South Vietnamese Ambassador to the United States (1967-72), wrote with David Chanoff:

> ...no one knew that Diem would prove an imperious and jealous ruler and that his pathologically narrow view of power would eventually destroy both his government and himself.[26]

THE VIET CONG

Vastly experienced by years of revolutionary war and intent on the reunification of Vietnam below the 17th parallel, Ho Chi Minh and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam hardly missed a beat after the signing of the Geneva Agreements. Duncanson, quoting Nguyen Huu Tho (later to be a leader of the National Liberation Front [NLF]), stated:

> Communist action to obstruct and ultimately destroy, the Diem regime was initiated within ten days of the signing of the Geneva Agreements: a "Committee for the Defence of Peace" was set up in Saigon on 1 August 1954.[27]

While the Democratic Republic of Vietnam met the requirements of the Geneva Agreements for disengagement of soldiers, they left behind them many Viet Minh sympathizers, local guerillas, and functioning cadres. During the years 1954 to 1958 these groups carefully organized themselves and prepared for the coming struggle. Starting in 1958, incidents of guerilla warfare began to increase, carried out

by the stay-behind sympathizers or by trained cadres returning from the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. In large part these new cadres were recruited from those who had gone north in 1954, and who were now able to return to the areas they knew. Roger Hilsman, assessed this as follows:

> A major attack was being launched. It was indirect, but still it was aggression-through the guerilla tactics and techniques of "internal war."[28]

During 1959 and 1960 the Democratic Republic of Vietnam became more vocal in its cries for the reunification of Vietnam until, eventually, the NLF was formed in December 1960. While at times divergences between Democratic Republic of Vietnam and NLF leadership and intentions were obvious, it was also obvious that the overall campaign in the south was directed from North Vietnam by the leadership of the Vietnamese Workers Party. Douglas Pike called the NLF a true Communist-front organization and quoted a Lao Dong (Workers) Party memorandum:

> ...the National Liberation Front has been established to unite closely various classes of the South Vietnamese population in the struggle against the Americans and Diem in accordance with the wishes of the South Vietnamese.[29]

The Viet Cong recruited support in the south by appeals to nationalism, anti-foreign sentiment, anti-Diem sentiment, and the promise of a better life. When necessary they used terror and coercion. By concentrating in the countryside, where support for Diem was weakest, the Viet

Cong aggressively pursued its war of national liberation. In the Basic Counterinsurgency Plan for Vietnam, a paper prepared by the U.S. Country Team Staff Committee in January 1961, the situation in South Vietnam was assessed as follows:

> Beginning in December 1959 and continuing to the present, there has been a mounting increase throughout South Vietnam of Viet Cong terrorist activities and guerilla warfare....Through the use of these tactics current Viet Cong military and political objectives are the overthrow of the Diem Government. Their immediate objectives are to eliminate any semblance of GVN control in rural areas, particularly the Mekong Delta and establish so-called "liberated zones."[30]

Despite ever increasing levels of American support and insistent claims to the contrary, the Viet Cong were by 1962 expanding their influence and showing increased capabilities. In a Research Memorandum from the Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Roger Hilsman assessed the Viet Cong situation in late 1962.

> On the contrary, the Viet Cong has expanded the size and enhanced the capability and organization of its guerilla force -- now estimated at about 23,000 in elite fighting personnel, plus some 100,000 irregulars and sympathizers. It still controls about 20 percent of the villages and about 9 percent of the rural population, and has varying degrees of influence among an additional 47 percent of the villages.[31]

Fighting a people's war of their own design, moulded from Mao Tse-tung and their experiences fighting the French, the Communists maintained a clear-cut and long-range goal of unifying Vietnam. The period 1960 through 1962, was very

much a politico-military struggle. The communists sought to gain the allegiance of the people against the Diem government. They sought to achieve this through a brilliant strategy called dau tranh, or struggle. There were two elements to this struggle, political and military. They believed that only by the marriage of violence to politics could victory be achieved. Military activities were important, but the real brilliance and strength of the communist approach lay in the recognition of the over-riding importance of the political struggle. They concentrated on this component of the struggle and, under the organizational structure of the Peoples Army of Vietnam, the military element was subordinate to the political element. Douglas Pike explained the broad nature of political dau tranh:

> ...political dau tranh means systematic coercive activity that involves motivation, social organization, communication of ideas, and mobilization of support.[32]

PREVIOUS EFFORTS AT PACIFICATION

In Vietnam, the two mutually constructive aims (security and development) of a true pacification campaign were not always met in prior efforts at pacification. With the return of the French to Indochina after World War II, and with the increasing challenges to French rule by the Viet Minh, the concept of pacification gained an added dimension. In this new dimension, the intent was to cut the insurgents off from their civilian support. Following contemporary British examples of Malaya, Kenya (Mau Mau) and

their own experiences in Algeria, the French tried various methods of population and resources control. These early attempts, such as food denial and resettlement, met with limited success since, by this time, the extent of Viet Minh control and influence was extensive and well-established.

With the departure of the French and the continuing insurgency threat, Diem began a new pacification program in July 1959. The new program, called Agrovilles, established areas where the previously scattered rural population were concentrated in large agricultural communities. The resultant settlements were situated along major routes of communications where barricades and guard posts would provide population movement control.[33] While both the protection provided to the rural population and the intent of cutting off insurgent support were admirable aims, they were not always met. In Vietnamese, the Agrovilles were called "Khu Tru Mat" (Closer Settlement Areas). When referring to historical examples of pacification, Bernard Fall made mention of the term, "concentration camp", where Boer civilians were assigned to towns during the Boer War.[34] Duncanson added emphasis to this less savoury intent of the Agrovilles:

> He (Diem) therefore decided to isolate families suspected of close intercourse with the Vietcong ....Province Chiefs were instructed to cause heads of Lien Gia [family group] to "demand" the rounding up of unreliable families, until within a few months 43,000 had been made to leave their scattered homes in the more newly settled areas of Cochinchina and build new houses on twenty-three resettlement estates marked out on the

> former French concessions, still uncultivated: digging wells and drains and making access and internal roads was done by corvee, henceforth called "community development".[35]

The government intended to create areas where the peasants could be subject to government control as well as be protected from the Viet Cong. At first it seemed that the program worked well. The United States viewed the program as a promising counterguerilla method and provided considerable support, both material and moral. In a 1961 report to President Diem and President Kennedy, Eugene Staley, President of the Stanford Research Institute and Presidential emissary, stated in reference to a Vietnamese plan to build over 100 Agrovilles during the next 18 months:

> Agrovilles and land development projects contribute materially to the solution of security problems in the rural areas. All possible efforts should be made to speed up these programs."[36]

Unfortunately, the Agroville scheme had many unintended consequences. By concentrating people it was certainly easier to control insurgent access to support, but it also meant that the peasants were restricted in their access to their land and livelihood. The peasants resented providing forced labour, which was unrewarded and inequitable. In particular they resented being forced to leave their homes, which often contained their family tombs, and the fields which they viewed as their ancestral lands.[37] Viet Cong reaction to the Agrovilles was also strong and

very effective. Government officials were threatened and assassinated, and construction sites were sacked and burnt. Zasloff observed that the Viet Cong reacted with special vigour, not only to exploit peasant bitterness against the government, but also to ensure that they were not isolated from influencing the peasants.[38] With only 23 Agrovilles started, the scheme was suspended in early 1961.[39]

As the insurgency situation worsened throughout 1961, President Diem again turned to the concept of pacification as a major weapon in the war against the insurgents.

ENDNOTES

[1]Statesman's Yearbook, 1964-1965, (London: The MacMillan Press Limited, 1965), 1596.

[2]Bernard B. Fall, "IndoChina 1946-1954", in D.M. Condit and others, eds., Challenge and Response in Internal Conflict, Volume I, The Experience in Asia (Washington, D.C.: The American University, 1968), 262. Fall estimated the number at 860,000.

[3]Frances Fitzgerald, Fire in the Lake (Boston: Atlantic - Little Brown Books, 1972), 9.

[4]Fall, "IndoChina 1946-54", 242.

[5]Robert Scigliano, South Vietnam: Nation Under Stress (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1963), 9.

[6]Joseph J. Zasloff, "The Problem of South Vietnam." Commentary (February 1962), 127.

[7]Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War, Executive and Legislative Roles and Relationships, Part I, 1945-1961, report prepared by William Conrad Gibbons, 98th Cong., 2d sess., 1984, Senate Print 98-185 Pt. 2, p. 299. This study characterizes U.S. support for Diem's announcement that he would not meet with the North Vietnamese to discuss the 1956 elections as, "complete".

[8]Lloyd W. Woodfuff, Local Administration in Vietnam: The Number of Local Units (Michigan State University Vietnam Advisory Group, Agency for International Development, 1962), 2. The units of local administration were:

Provinces	38
Municipalities	4
Districts	209
Cantons	310
Villages	2,579
Hamlets	16,398

[9]Jason L. Finkle and Tran Van Dinh, Provincial Government in Vietnam A Study of Vinh Long Province (Saigon: Michigan State University Vietnam Advisory Group and National Institute of Administration, 1961), 9.

[10]Woodruff, Local Administration in Vietnam: The Number of Local Units, 4.

[11]Dennis J. Duncanson, Government and Revolution in Vietnam (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 237.

[12]Woodruff, Local Administration in Vietnam: The Number of Local Units, 5.

[13]Presidential Ordinance No. 115-a/TTP/VP dated 24 October 1956 - Saigon, in Appendix C to Finkle and Tranh Van Dinh, Provincial Government in Vietnam A Study of Vinh Long Province. This Ordinance details the reorganization of the administrative structure of the Republic of Vietnam.

[14]Woodruff, Local Administration in Vietnam: The Number of Local Units, 15.

[15]Ibid, 17.

[16]Finkle and Tranh Van Dinh, Provincial Government in Vietnam A Study of Vinh Long Province, 78.

[17]Ibid, 17.

[18]Woodruff, Local Administration in Vietnam: The Number of Local Units, 21.

[19]Scigliano, South Vietnam: Nation Under Stress, 33.

[20]Pham Chung, Analysis of the Long-Range Military, Political and Social Effects of the Strategic Hamlet Program in Vietnam (Washington D.C.: Advanced Research Projects Agency, Office of the Secretary of Defense, 1964), 7-8.

[21]Duncanson, Government and Revolution in Vietnam, 222.

[22]Ibid, 216.

[23]Ibid, 216-217.

[24]William A. Nighswonger, "Rural Pacification in Vietnam, 1962-1965" (Ph.D. diss., The American University, 1966), 21.

[25]Ibid, 22.

[26]Bui Diem and David Chanoff, In The Jaws of History (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987), 86.

[27]Duncanson, Government and Revolution in Vietnam, 251.

[28]Roger Hilsman, To Move a Nation (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1967), 419.

[29]Douglas Pike, Viet Cong (Cambridge: The M.I.T. Press, 1966), 81.

[30]Paper prepared by the Country Team Staff Committee, "Basic Counterinsurgency Plan for Vietnam," Saigon, 4 January 1961, in Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume I, Vietnam 1961, Department of State Publication 9625, (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1988), 1. This collection of State Department documents is hereafter referred to as DSP 9625.

[31]Research Memorandum, RFE-59, "The Situation and Short-Term Prospects in South Vietnam," Department of State, Bureau of Intelligence and Research, 3 December 1962, by Roger Hilsman, in the Senator Gravel Edition, The Pentagon Papers, Volume II (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 690.

[32]Douglas Pike, PAVN: Peoples Army of Vietnam (Novato: Presidio Press, 1986), 217.

[33]Zasloff, "The Problem of South Vietnam," 133.

[34]Bernard B. Fall, The Two Vietnams (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1971), 375.

[35]Duncanson, Government and Revolution in Vietnam, 261.

[36]Letter from the Vietnam and United States Special Financial Groups to President Diem and President Kennedy, July 14, 1961, by Vu Quoc Thuo, Chairman and Eugene Staley, Chairman, in Congress, House, Committee on Armed Services, United States Vietnam Relations 1945-1967, Book 11, The Kennedy Administration: January 1961 - November 1963, (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1971), Book 11, p196.

[37]Zasloff, "The Problem of South Vietnam," 133.

[38]Ibid, 134.

[39]Nighswonger, "Rural Pacification in Vietnam, 1962-1965", 66.

CHAPTER 3

TOWARDS STRATEGIC HAMLETS

The new pacification effort was to become known as the Strategic Hamlet Program. Like all previous efforts and those to follow, it was an attempt to gain the allegiance of the peasantry. To govern successfully, President Diem had to secure the loyalty of the peasants who comprised the vast majority of the population. According to Joseph Zasloff, the Viet Cong also sought the allegiance of the peasants:

> Although the peasants are politically unorganized, they constitute both the base and the core of Vietnamese society and are, therefore, the medium in which the Viet Cong's guerilla activity is centered.[1]

THE GOVERNMENT OF VIETNAM

For the Government of Vietnam, the adoption of the Strategic Hamlet Program was not a novel or revolutionary step. In many ways the strategic hamlets were a continuation of the pacification efforts that had gone before. As a result, it is difficult to make a clear delinlation between the end of the Agrovilles and the start of the Strategic Hamlet Program. What is clear is that the strategic hamlets were a change in focus away from the

village to the smaller and more cohesive unit, the hamlet. While the U.S. and British advisers were discussing a strategic plan during 1961 and into early 1962, the Government of Vietnam was already implementing strategic hamlets. Part of this work involved the "Citizens Irregular Defense Groups", which was a program sponsored by William Colby, the CIA station chief in Saigon. The 400 man Special Forces group sent to Vietnam in May 1961 was assigned to the program, which was designed to help villagers defend themselves, and at the same time improve their living conditions.[2]

William Nighswonger reported on "strategic hamlets" being developed as early as May and July 1961.[3] All this occurred well before the arrival of Robert Thompson and the publishing of Roger Hilsman's "Strategic Concept for Vietnam." Robert Thompson confirmed these early beginnings when, shortly after his arrival in South Vietnam in October 1961, he observed defended hamlets already in operation. He found these hamlets primarily in the more adaptable villages of Annam along the coast north of Saigon.[4] These early hamlets were most likely the efforts of Ngo Dinh Can, another of the Ngo brothers, who introduced the Force Populaire in Central Vietnam in mid-1961. The Force Populaire consisted of a company of up to 100 local men who would move into a village for a period of up to three months and in a manner similar to the Communists, would try to

establish their influence over the area.[5] Nighswonger emphasized these early beginnings:

> In mid-1961, the strategic hamlet program had been started (although not yet announced) by Ngo Dinh Nhu. He moved in advance and independently of American planners, including the members of the Staley mission who were discussing plans for rural rehabilitation at that time.[6]

ADVICE

By mid-1961 South Vietnam had already started strategic hamlets, and the government had some experience with pacification through the Agroville scheme. But, as Diem struggled with the problems of insurgency, he turned to other countries in an attempt both to learn from their experiences and, more particularly, to gain moral, material, and financial support. Diem sought advice and assistance from both the Philippines and Malaya, as well as from the countries who had supported them. This included British advisers from Malaya and U.S. advisers from the Philippines.

Although the experiences in Malaya and the Philippines were unique, there were many similarities with the situation in the Republic of Vietnam. Both Malaya and the Philippines used pacification as a major component of their strategy to defeat their insurgencies. As Diem considered his options, it was natural that he should look at these experiences.

The Malayan Communist Party, because of its opposition to the Japanese, was supported by the British

during World War II. It emerged from the war and, within a short time, launched an insurgency that lasted until 1960. The Malayan Emergency, while different from the insurgency in Vietnam, bore many enticing similarities. One of these similarities was the program called "New Villages." This program involved the resettlement of 600,000 squatters on agricultural land to which they were given title-deeds.[7]

The villages provided the squatters protection from intimidation and, for the first time, permitted services such as schools, clinics, and electricity to be provided. Two elements stood out as the scheme progressed. The first was the fact that, for the vast majority of the peasants, this was the first land they could call their own. The second was that comprehensive efforts were made to involve the villagers in government through elections to village councils that were created to give the people power and responsibility. Robert Thompson, initially a Chinese Affairs Officer, was responsible for creating these New Village Councils in southern Malaya. Thompson was later to play an important role in the Strategic Hamlet Program.

In the Philippines, the Communists who fought against the Japanese in World War II were known as the Huks. They emerged from the war and sought to seize power through a people's war. While there was no large-scale resettlement program in the Philippines, land reform played a significant role in alleviating the peasants' grievances. Pacification efforts in the Philippines occurred very much as a result of

the efforts of Ramon Magsaysay. First as Secretary of Defense, and then as President, Magsaysay inspired the trust and confidence of the Philippine people. When necessary, he used military forces, but his program of pacification was aimed at winning people rather than battles. He sought to make the government responsive to the people's needs, and he was ruthless against corruption and incompetence. As a result the Huk Rebellion was under control by 1954.[8] A principal adviser to President Magsaysay was a U.S. Air Force officer, LTC Edward Lansdale, who also became a prominent adviser to President Diem in South Vietnam.

The United States had another claim to offering advice apart from its experience in the Philippines. It had paid the price to be heard. From the early 1950s, the United States began replacing France as the major supplier of finance, equipment and advice. Between 1955 and 1961, the United States spent approximately $275 million per year in Vietnam for defense support and direct military assistance. Defense support alone paid the entire cost of the Government of Vietnam's military budget, which was about half of the country's annual budget.[9]

The actual impact of external influence on Diem is difficult to assess. The foreign advisers were certainly not instrumental in making the decision to begin the strategic hamlets; this decision had already been made. The advisers were used to provide operational advice and, in the case of the United States, to provide financial and material

support. That the advisers to Diem played an important role cannot be denied. Lansdale became a close adviser to Diem. Neil Sheehan went so far as to claim, "South Vietnam, it can be truly said, was the creation of Edward Lansdale."[10] Later on Diem would turn to Robert Thompson, the British expert from the Malayan Emergency. Thompson arrived in Saigon in October 1961 from Malaya, where he had been the Secretary of Defence during the Emergency. He, too, quickly became a close adviser to Diem.

THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

The ideas of President Kennedy in his first year of office provided much of the impetus in the development of the American view of the Strategic Hamlet Program. President Kennedy, frustrated by the limited options available under the policy of nuclear dominance, sought a new strategy to cope with situations short of nuclear war. Maxwell Taylor's ideas of flexible response provided the strategy. This strategy allowed the President the opportunity to tailor a response appropriate to the threat. In what Douglas Blaufarb has called the "Counterinsurgency Era", Kennedy and many of his advisers stressed that a combination of military, political, economic, and psychological actions was the best response to the situation in Southeast Asia.

Although U.S advisers were already in Vietnam, President Kennedy at first showed little interest in the situation there, being preoccupied first with Laos and then

Cuba. This was to change quickly. From early 1961 a flurry of visits and decisions reinforced the U.S. commitment to Vietnam. The visits were designed primarily to determine the level of U.S. moral, financial, and eventually, troop support to the beleagured nation. As the threat to South Vietnam increased, the need for troop support became more and more compelling. In this environment, the arguments for pacification and for some of the new ideas on counterinsurgency seemed to assume lesser importance.

However, in line with the ideas of President Kennedy and his administration and in light of the desire to explore all available options, many of the visitors to South Vietnam considered the future of pacification and its likely effectiveness. At no stage though, was pacification ever subjected to serious and detailed study. As will be seen, the Strategic Hamlet Program became an amalgam of ideas from many different sources. Pacification was mentioned repeatedly in many of the reports. The discussion that follows is an attempt to extract from the reports and public record only those ideas and actions pertinent to pacification and strategic hamlets. It is in no way an attempt to detail the American decision to commit ever-increasing numbers of forces to South Vietnam.

In January 1961, President Kennedy, in one of his first actions in office, approved the "Basic Counterinsurgency Plan for Vietnam" (CIP). This plan, prepared in Vietnam by the interdepartmental U.S. Country

Team Staff Committee, detailed its mission as the "defeat of Communist insurgency efforts in SVN."[11]

Tasks were allocated in four areas: political, security, economic, and psychological. Of particular significance later, as the decision to support the Strategic Hamlet Program was made, were some of the sub-tasks allocated within the CIP. These included establishing and maintaining political and economic control and stability, improving communications between the government and its people, and attracting the loyalty of the population to the Government of Vietnam and to the Diem regime. Other elements of the plan included the development of an agreed overall plan of operations, an improvement in the Republic of Vietnam military command and control structure, and an increase in the size of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). The plan also contained statements on the need for political reform in South Vietnam. Notes to the plan emphasize that it was a U.S. plan, not a South Vietnamese plan. Many of the elements, particularly the political ones were not especially palatable to Diem. As a consequence Ambassador Durbrow is quoted as saying when concluding a dispatch that consideration should be given to what steps "we are prepared to take to encourage, or if necessary to force, acceptance of all essential elements of the plan."[12] The demands for reform were not popular with Diem, but they were presented as a trade-off for the aid package implicit in the CIP.

While the CIP was designed to change the emphasis of government activities from defence against a conventional threat to internal security measures, it did not have this effect. Even though it was aimed at the insurgency, the plan failed to deal comprehensively with the insurgency threat. Historian Ronald Spector argues that the plan represented a culmination of the traditional American approach to Vietnam, which was to provide a defence force to protect the country from an invasion from North Vietnam. The CIP did not bring about a new approach to the war. Spector suggests that,

> With the drastic deterioration of the security situation, American military leaders fell back on organizational, technical, and bureaucratic measures as the most appropriate devices to combat the Viet Cong.[13]

Vice President Johnson visited South Vietnam from 11 to 13 May 1961. Johnson's visit was designed to demonstrate U.S. resolve and support for Diem. It very clearly did this, and on 20 May 1961 a State Department telegram to the Embassy in Vietnam conveyed a "Presidential Program for Vietnam," which listed a series of actions approved by President Kennedy. The objective of the program was:

> To prevent Communist domination of Viet-Nam by initiating, on an accelerated basis, a series of mutually supporting actions of a political, military, economic, psychological, and covert character, designed to create in that country a viable and increasingly democratic society to keep Viet-Nam free.[14]

Commitments and expressions of support were fine, but what was lacking at this stage was an overall strategy for the defeat of the insurgents. In South Vietnam, the U.S. Military Assistance and Advisory Group (USMAAG) recognized this deficiency and, on 15 September 1961, published a plan to complement the earlier Counterinsurgency Plan.

The new plan was the "Geographically Phased National Level Plan for Counterinsurgency." This innovative plan specified the areas of primary concern for pacification and gave an outline of necessary phases. The first phase was the "preparatory phase", in which intelligence was gathered and social surveys were carried out. In the second phase, the "military phase", regular forces would clear an area and then hand it over to the Civil Guard. The third and final phase was the "security phase." In this phase the Self Defense Corps (SDC) assumed the security mission, and economic and social programs were to be instituted to consolidate government control. Priority was allocated by area with War Zone D, an area to the north of Saigon, being a preparatory action. Other areas to follow in sequence over a three year period were the area around Saigon, the Delta, and the Highlands.[15]

This plan maintained an emphasis on counterinsurgency efforts and provided a solid basis for further consideration. The major difficulty with this initiative was similar to the one experienced with the CIP. The plans were not Vietnamese plans. They were the product of the

USMAAG and had to be "sold" to Diem. This was to prove extremely difficult, with Diem stubbornly resisting them, mostly because they were accompanied by demands for social and political reform. As a result, U.S. demands for reform were largely unsuccessful and became a point of tension between Diem and his American advisers.

Eugene Staley, an economist, was sent to Vietnam to determine the economic implications of the commitment to the Government of Vietnam. The resulting "Joint Action Program" was submitted in July 1961. Written by U.S. and Vietnamese financial groups, the report dealt primarily with military issues, particularly force levels and who would pay for them. In addition, it included observations on social and political reforms which were to play their part in shaping the Strategic Hamlet Program. The study group recognized the problem of restoring internal security in the face of a tough and widespread enemy. The view of the study group was that military internal security requirements must take first priority on manpower and economic resources. Once the situation had stabilized, economic and social programs aimed at long-range development could be emphasized. Significantly, the group also recognized that the problem was more than a military one. Where possible, the military was to support civic action programs through pacification (which Staley rather narrowly saw as rendering areas safe for civil population), reconstruction, and assistance to civil administration. In the report, the group saw the

restoration of internal security as the primary problem and, in reference to the Agrovilles, made the observation:

> Its solution also demands stepped-up economic and social action, especially in rural areas, closely integrated with the military action. For example, one of the more promising counter-guerilla methods tried up to this time involves regrouping scattered rural populations into more readily defensible communities so designed and assisted as also to offer improved opportunities for livelihood.[16]

While a flurry of activity continued in Washington, Diem, in Saigon, became convinced that the situation was worsening, and he stressed the need for more United States assistance to further increase his military forces. In an effort to gather more information, President Kennedy decided to send his personal military advisor, General Maxwell D. Taylor, to Vietnam. General Taylor was accompanied by Walt W. Rostow, the President's Deputy Special Assistant for National Security Affairs, Brigadier General Edward G. Lansdale, and a staff representing both the Department of Defense and the Department of State.

In his report submitted to the President on 3 November 1961, General Taylor covered a wide variety of subjects and made many proposals. What was most striking about his proposals was the recognition that "what is now required is a shift from U.S. advice to limited partnership and working collaboration with the Vietnamese."[17] He proposed a change in the charter, the spirit, and the organization of the MAAG; a change which was, in effect, a

shift from an advisory group to something closer to an operational headquarters, eventually called Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV). These topics, as well as considerations concerning the introduction of U.S. combat forces, occupied the administration almost exclusively after General Taylor's return from Vietnam.

National Security Action Memorandum Number (NSAM) 111, was issued in Washington on 22 November 1961. President Diem was subsequently informed of the contents of the NSAM and advised that the U.S. Government was prepared to join his government in a sharply increased effort to avoid a further deterioration of the situation. Proposed action to support the Government of Vietnam included uniformed U.S. personnel to man, operate, and advise on equipment such as airlift, small craft, air reconnaissance, and intelligence. NSAM 111 also called for a reorganization of the MAAG to the MACV and for additional U.S. military personnel to provide increased military assistance and operational collaboration.[18]

While these and other operational matters were the main thrust of the NSAM, the document also maintained a counterinsurgency focus. Economic aid was to be provided under the guise of flood relief (there had been a disastrous flood in the Mekong area). Priority of economic assistance was given to projects in support of an expanded counterinsurgency effort. Administrators and advisers were to be made available to assist in government administration.

As well, U.S. personnel were to be allowed to conduct a joint survey of conditions in each of the provinces to assess factors bearing on the counterinsurgency program. NSAM 111 was formalized in Saigon, on 4 December 1961, by a Memorandum of Understanding between the two governments.[19] This memorandum essentially adopted all components of the NSAM.

This expanded effort was not without cost to the Government of Vietnam. The U.S. continued its theme of encouraging reform and asked the Government of Vietnam to decentralize and broaden its base, to allow government agencies adequate authority to perform their functions, and to overhaul the military establishment and command structure. As the U.S. advisers continued to press reforms on Diem and made continued requests for an overall strategy, he began to indicate that he had a new strategy of his own.[20] Although there appears to be no direct evidence, it is very likely that Diem was referring to the ideas of Robert Thompson, who had recently arrived in Saigon and was offering advice to Diem based on his experience in Malaya.

On 16 December 1961 the U.S. Secretary of Defense, Robert S. McNamara, convened a conference in Honolulu to discuss the situation in South Vietnam. In attendance were the secretary and his principal civilian advisers and generals involved in the Vietnamese problem. The Secretary of Defense saw the mission of the conference as determining what could be done to improve the situation in Vietnam.

Major General Parker, Special Assistant to General Lyman Lemnitzer, who was then the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, observed that the secretary mentioned that: the conference had great authority from the President; money was no object; and "the one restriction is [that] combat troops will not be introduced."[21] What stands out about the conference is the sense of urgency stressed by the Secretary and General Lemnitzer. The Political Adviser to the Commander-in-Chief Pacific noted after the meeting:

> "they wanted concrete actions that would begin to show results in 30 days. They were not interested in projects to be completed in 1963."[22]

This new sense of urgency grew out of the increased Viet Cong threat, the decision to draw the line against Communism in Vietnam, and political considerations in Washington. Unfortunately, this sense of urgency meant trouble for the counterinsurgency efforts in South Vietnam. The social, political, and economic reforms which were the core of the counterinsurgency school of thought could not be achieved in anything like 30 days. General McGarr, Chief of the MAAG, in a telegram to General Lemnitzer dated 27 December 1961, rather bitterly observed that the demand for quick solutions based on large-scale military solutions would not give permanent results and would prove counterproductive. He indicated that the top civilian policy makers were thinking of solving a very unconventional situation in a basically conventional manner. It was his

opinion that permanent results required long range action on all fronts. General McGarr supported this view by reference to Robert Thompson's estimate of the time required to bring about a resolution to the problem as being 5 years.[23]

This new sense of urgency was commendable. But, by concentrating on the military threat, it indicated a significant departure from the counterinsurgency inclinations expressed by many in the administration. To them the solution could not be achieved quickly, and the military was not the most appropriate force to achieve the desired results. The move towards a military solution may be partially explained by the fact that it was a Department of Defense conference and, as such, did not represent the view of the entire administration. While it may not have represented the administration's overall view, these were the men who were charged with the responsibility for the conduct of the war.

In Washington, the search for an overall strategy continued, and in early 1962 Roger Hilsman was tasked with producing a "Strategic Concept for Vietnam." His report was submitted to President Kennedy through General Taylor on 2 February 1962. In his report Hilsman established three basic principles: the problem in Vietnam must be seen as political rather than military; an effective counterinsurgency plan must provide protection and security; and counterguerilla forces must adopt the same tactics used by the guerillas.[24] The heart of Hilsman's operational plan

was the call for civic action to be achieved through the establishment of strategic villages. He called for three phases which would extend government control from the least heavily Viet Cong influenced provinces out to the areas along the Cambodian and Laotian borders.

Editorial comment in the Pentagon Papers called Hilsman's concept "an unabashed restatement of Thompson's major points."[25] In reality, it was the result of considerable analysis and what Roger Hilsman called "pioneering work" conducted concurrently at the Pentagon, the Central Intelligence Agency, the Agency for International Development, and at Fort Bragg.[26] Hilsman headed the State Department Bureau of Intelligence and Research, which had been analysing past guerilla wars and had concluded that in Southeast Asia the people had little or no identification with the government. In circumstances like this, it was not difficult for a trained and disciplined cadre, the Viet Cong, to win over the people. The Bureau of Intelligence and Research argued that the idea that a government in Asia could really care and be responsive to the people was as revolutionary as anything the Communists had to offer. The strategic villages had at least a chance to win over the allegiance of the people if the physical security provided by the military could be provided for a long enough period for the appeal to take hold.

That Hilsman borrowed heavily from Thompson cannot be disputed. The two had met and discussed the concept. Hilsman wrote:

> It seemed to Ambassador Nolting and to others in the Embassy that Thompson's ideas made a great deal of sense--as they certainly did to me when I heard it all from Thompson himself.[27]

Hilsman and Thompson's ideas had in large part developed in parallel and had been nurtured by studying the same historical events as well as by the sharing of ideas during 1961 through the auspices of General Taylor. Hilsman had not copied Thompson's ideas. In many ways the strategic hamlets were an idea whose time had come.

The rhetoric of President Kennedy and many in his administration extolled the virtues of counterinsurgency and seemed ideally suited to the problems of South Vietnam. In execution, though, their rhetoric had little effect in determining the conduct of the war. Dorothy Donnelly noted in her doctoral dissertation:

> ...the American military establishment never did substantially alter its doctrine, planning, training, attitudes, or officer assignments to a degree in any way compatible with counterinsurgency as it was conceived by political officials.[28]

Roger Hilsman emphasized this point when discussing the replacement of General McGarr as the senior U.S. general in South Vietnam. Hilsman saw the ideal replacement as one of the younger generals who shared the conviction that

guerilla warfare was as much a political as a military problem.[29] In the end, McGarr was replaced by General Harkins, who as Maxwell Taylor's nomination was seen as being very conservative. David Halberstam saw Harkins as "a man of compelling mediocrity."[30] Halberstam accused Harkins of not understanding the special nature of the war:

> Occasionally Harkins would mouth phrases about this being a political war, but he did not really believe them. The American military command thought this was like any other war: you searched out the enemy, fixed him, killed him and went home.[31]

This attitude was prevalent. Captain Andrew Krepinevich recorded some of the attitudes of senior U.S. military officers in a study for the United States Military Academy. Krepinevich reported that the Army brass rejected being told to alter their traditional way of doing business by a group of novice civilian "Whiz Kids." Krepinevich claims that the Army was disinterested in the President's proposals. The generals were convinced that the traditional approach to war could handle any problems that might develop at the lower end of the spectrum of war. General Lemnitzer stated that the new administration was oversold on the importance of guerilla warfare. General Taylor who fostered the idea of flexible response and who became the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff after General Lemnitzer was also critical:

> Any well trained organization can shift the tempo to that which might be required in this kind of situation.

> All this cloud of dust that's coming out of the White House really isn't necessary.[32]

The main impact of these differing opinions was to allow the development of two distinct attitudes towards the situation in South Vietnam. These attitudes differed in two extremely important areas: the true nature of the problem and how it would be solved.

The U.S. military, through the MAAG and later the MACV, saw the true nature of the problem as military rather than political; as a result the priority of effort should be aimed at the destruction of the enemy's armed force by the use of firepower and manoeuvre.[33] To the military, strategic hamlets were an inadequate solution because the military situation had deteriorated beyond the level where they would work and any likely results would take too long to have any demonstrable effect. The military was also very reluctant to allow the use of police forces as the primary means of combatting the insurgency. They had objected to this suggestion when presented by a Michigan State University advisory group in the 1950s and would repeat it as a major objection to Robert Thompson's plans.

Other elements of the U.S. Government, predominantly the Department of State, viewed the problem in South Vietnam primarily as a political problem. To them the strategic hamlets were a means of winning the allegiance of the people and thereby defeating the communists at the grassroots level.

The resolution of these differences was to have a profound effect on the implementation and conduct of the Strategic Hamlet Program. Douglas Blaufarb suggested that the result was that there were, in fact, two programs to defeat the insurgency, the strategic hamlets and the military effort. Except for a few set-piece operations there was never "any real coordination and common planning between the two efforts."[34] This lack of coordination was all too evident in the command and control arrangements within the U.S. Embassy and the U.S. Country Team. The U.S. Foreign Aid Mission established an Office of Rural Development headed by Rufus Phillips with the responsibility for strategic hamlets. At the same time, the MAAG set up yet another special office. Neither side seemed able to see that the Strategic Hamlet Program was part military and part political, and that to work effectively, close coordination and cooperation were necessary. Hilsman reported to President Kennedy that there was no overall plan that tied the civilian and military effort together and that there was confusion between both groups about how to conduct a counterguerilla war. The U.S. effort in Vietnam was managed by a multitude of independent agencies with little or no overall direction. As a result, it was Hilsman's opinion that "the U.S. effort, although massive is fragmented and duplicative."[35] As will be seen, there were other players in the Strategic Hamlet Program, yet this significant fragmentation existed in only the U.S. camp.

THE UNITED KINGDOM

On 17 September 1961, in the midst of the intense diplomatic and advisory activity between the U.S. and the Government of Vietnam, there was an announcement from the British Foreign Office that the United Kingdom would establish an advisory mission in Saigon under the general direction of the British Ambassador, Harry Hohler. Robert Thompson was appointed head of the British Advisory Mission.[36] The British provided the mission in response to a number of requests and queries for third country help and support. The mission, consisting of five civilians, was given the task to "advise the Government on police and intelligence aspects of the war."[37] This limited tasking was intended to ensure that Thompson and his group would not try to duplicate the work being done by American military and police experts.[38] The wording of the task established a clear delineation between Thompson and the U.S. advisers who had expressed concerns that Thompson would be giving advice without responsibility.[39] While initially easing the way between the two groups, the agreed division of responsibilities was to prove a point of contention as work on the concept continued.

Initially, though, there was considerable cooperation, and Thompson, on his way to Saigon, stopped off in Washington where he met with Generals Taylor and Lemnitzer. He met with Taylor again when the latter visited Saigon in October 1961. As has been discussed, there was a

definite correlation between Thompson's ideas and the culmination of U.S. thought expressed in Hilsman's "Strategic Concept for Vietnam."

Within weeks of his arrival, Thompson provided Diem with his initial appreciation. The President was impressed with Thompson's ideas, and on 13 November, Thompson submitted a detailed plan outlining the measures required to clear the communists from the Delta area to the south and west of Saigon. This plan became known as the "Delta Plan." In chillingly prophetic words, Thompson wrote that if the main emphasis was placed on killing terrorists there was a grave risk that more communists would be created than would be killed. He stressed that the overall aim of any insurgency must be to win the people. Once this was done, the killing of communist terrorists would follow automatically.[40]

The Delta Plan was extremely comprehensive and, in seeming contravention of his tasking, Thompson covered much more than just "police and intelligence matters." Under Thompson's proposals military units were assigned tasks designed to keep the main Communist forces off balance while the framework of the strategic hamlets was being established. His intention was that military units be used only in the initial stages to protect the villages while the villagers were organizing to protect themselves. He wanted to do away with the "search and destroy" sweeps and use "clear and hold" operations.[41] Under "clear and hold

operations," instead of withdrawing after the area was clear of enemy, the military units would remain and provide protection for the civic action teams that would move into the area to institute the economic, social, and political reforms.

The villagers would also be protected through a Self Defence Corps and the Civil Guard. Eventually the Army would be released to fight in areas where the communist threat was more intense and the need for conventional military forces was greater. Thompson suggested that a start be made in the area to the north of Saigon and in the Highlands. To provide the basis for protection, he proposed civil emergency measures that involved the establishment of two types of hamlets. "Defended hamlets" were to be established in areas where the communists were strong, such as along the Cambodian border. "Strategic hamlets," which were less heavily defended, were to be established in the remainder of the area.

Once the villages were protected and the peasants were secure, the real objective of the plan could be implemented. This aim was the economic, social, and political improvements that were designed to win the allegiance of the peasants by offering them a realistic alternative to the Communists.

U.S. REACTION TO THE THOMPSON PLAN

In South Vietnam the initial U.S. reaction to Thompson's plan was not positive. Ambassador Nolting, in a telegram to the Department of State, reported that the Thompson mission was "badly off rails from viewpoint US-UK coordination." The Ambassador was not critical of Thompson's plan, seeing it as an admirable statement of concepts of anti-guerilla operations. Nolting's concern was that Thompson, by offering advice directly to Diem, would complicate U.S. efforts to bring about reforms in the military and administrative structure of South Vietnam. Nolting was critical of Thompson's proposed command and control structure, which effectively gave Diem operational control through a powerful National Internal Security Council (NISC). Thompson's ideas on command and control were contrary to U.S. advice on setting up a proper military command structure and delegating authority to it. Nolting further expressed the view that Diem "accepted" Thompson's plan out of a desire to avoid the delegation of authority that the U.S. had been pressing on him. Nolting felt that unless Diem began to delegate authority to the military commanders in the field, there would never be an effective counterinsurgency effort.[42]

General McGarr echoed Ambassador Nolting's reservations about Thompson's proposed command and control arrangements and added criticisms of his own in three additional areas. First, he did not agree with the

selection of the Delta as the initial priority. His preference was for War Zone D, where the communists were stronger. He hoped that a successful operation there would help the revitalized ARVN demonstrate its offensive spirit. Second, he did not agree with Thompson's intention to emphasize police forces instead of conventional military forces. McGarr felt that sizeable military forces would continue to play an important role in pacification. Finally, McGarr felt that Thompson's proposal did not move quickly enough. He agreed that there was a need to act in a limited area, but felt that it needed to be done quickly.[43]

The reaction to Thompson's plan was different in Washington. As has been observed, Hilsman's "Strategic Concept" was very similar to Thompson's plan. Editorial comment in the Pentagon Papers suggests Thompson's ideas were winning an attentive ear in Washington and that President Kennedy was favourably disposed towards Thompson's concept.[44]

As it became obvious that Washington was keen on the ideas expressed by Thompson and Hilsman, the view from the MAAG in South Vietnam altered. The MAAG reaction to the plan had also been improved by a meeting between the Ambassador Hohler, Ambassador Nolting, and Thompson. In this meeting Thompson had agreed to make some amendments to his plan, thus removing the major MAAG objections, which were mostly procedural. Thompson agreed to amend his proposals for command arrangements and also dropped

temporarily the issue of the police being in charge of pacification instead of the ARVN.

PRESIDENT DIEM'S REACTION TO THE THOMPSON PLAN

It is interesting to consider the reaction of Diem to Robert Thompson's "Delta Plan." Diem had visited Malaya in early 1960 and was impressed with what he saw. As a result he had invited Thompson to visit Vietnam in April 1960 to see how the lessons of Malaya could be applied.[45] In 1961, the President again invited Thompson to SVN, this time with a small advisory mission of experienced civilians to be called the British Advisory Mission.[46] He was aware of Thompson's work with the successful New Villages in Malaya and was attracted to his ideas. Thus, the President's enthusiasm for Thompson's Delta Plan was hardly surprising. What is interesting, though, is the view put forward by Dennis Duncanson, who was a member of the British Advisory Mission. He suggested that Thompson's strategic plan was discussed in Vietnamese circles at the beginning of 1962 and promptly rejected.[47] Thompson himself did not see his plan as surviving very long, seeing it "lost in the concept of strategic hamlets."[48] Duncanson offered the explanation that the Vietnamese were more interested in enlisting the moral support of the British than following their practical advice.[49]

Diem's seeming enthusiasm for Thompson's plan should also be considered in the light of his continuing battle with his U.S. advisers. The plan was presented to him at

the same time as the intense negotiation surrounding the outcome of General Taylor's mission to SVN. The resulting NSAM and Memorandum of Understanding, while committing the U.S. to larger levels of support, also demanded political and social reforms of Diem as well as the adoption of an overall strategy (presented in the Counterinsurgency Plan and Geographically Phased Plan). Thompson's plan presented Diem with an alternative to the proposed U.S. strategy. Editorial comment in the Pentagon Papers saw Thompson's plan as a "potential rival."[50] It is entirely probable that Diem's enthusiasm for the plan was largely based on the fact that it did not demand reforms to his method of government and, as has been observed, allowed him control over the conduct of the Strategic Hamlet Program.

In view of Duncanson's observations about the rejection of Thompson's plan, there is good reason to suggest that Government of Vietnam support for this plan was more in the way of a bargaining ploy to be used against the U.S. demands for reform. Diem resented these demands and, in the end, his reluctance to accept them resulted in Washington softening its demands and committing itself more to Diem's view of the war as a military problem rather than a social and political problem.[51]

Throughout this period of negotiation, Diem was concerned with obtaining U.S. support, but at the same time he did not wish to appear as a puppet of the United States. Editorial comment in the Pentagon Papers suggested that Diem

became attracted to the strategic hamlet idea for two reasons: it was a way of getting U.S. material support for a program that would be almost entirely Government of Vietnam implemented; and it put achieving security before winning loyalty.[52] If Diem could achieve this type of support from the United States, he would be able to maintain Vietnamese sovereignty and authority and, at the same time, extend his control over the countryside.

WHOSE IDEA?

It is difficult to reconcile the many claims that the Strategic Hamlet Program resulted from the work of any one man or group. The United States and British advisers certainly developed new ideas, but in principle the intent behind the overall concept of pacification remained largely unaltered. The work done by the U.S. and British ensured that more emphasis was placed on development and social programs. This was a way of ensuring that the people stayed with the government after they had been separated from the insurgents. Development programs also satisfied the demands of Diem's U.S. advisers. The basic concept of strategic hamlets, however, remains firmly a South Vietnamese idea. The key figure in the development of the idea and the implementation of the entire program was Ngo Dinh Nhu, the President's brother and key adviser.

While there were a number of sources for the strategic hamlet concept, the point of their convergence into a single idea was Nhu.[53] In an issue devoted to

Strategic Hamlets, the Times of Vietnam of 28 October 1962 referred to Nhu as the "architect" of the Strategic Hamlet Program.[54] This was confirmed by William Colby, who was the CIA station chief in South Vietnam and was in close contact with Nhu at the time. Colby wrote that "Nhu himself took public and formal leadership and responsibility for the program."[55]

Nhu was an intellectual and an ambitious man who, as brother and political counsellor to the President, had a great deal of influence over him.[56] Being close to his brother and as the organizer of the regime's secret political organization, the Can Lao, he occupied a very important place in political life in South Vietnam. Nhu was enthusiastic both about the Strategic Hamlet Program and the promises of moral, financial and physical support offered by the U.S. and British advisers. His enthusiasm was not, however, based entirely on the prospect of improving life in the country. He also viewed it as a way of extending the government's power base (and his own) throughout the country. He thought more in terms of control, regimentation, political indoctrination, and organization than of an opportunity to raise living standards.[57] To Nhu, the program was an opportunity to establish a political power base founded on a one party system. To Robert Thompson, this was not entirely a bad thing as the Vietnamese were in search of an ideology as an answer to

Communism.[58] This ideology was to be personalism, as expounded by the President and his brother.

This confusing philosophy was to provide the basis for the Strategic Hamlet Program. The strategic hamlets and personalism provided a counter-revolution to the communists by offering "a revolutionary system native to underdeveloped countries who have suffered misery and humiliation, divided minds and communist subversion."[59] To Diem and Nhu, their revolution would:

> ...seek to implement freedom and democracy within a system of order and respect for duly constituted authority, to liberate the Vietnamese people from underdevelopment and division and to defeat communism.[60]

AIMS OF THE GOVERNMENT OF VIETNAM

The name strategic hamlet did not come entirely from the military nature of the program. The hamlets were to play an equally important role in allowing the development of the economic, social and political aspects of Vietnamese life. By combining all of these factors and concentrating governmental activities at the hamlet level, the government expected that the Communists would be defeated and that the basic aim of implementing democracy in the rural areas would be met.

The government faced an insurgent threat that relied on the rural population for its survival and growth. This threat required that the government isolate the guerillas from the people who, in many cases, were supporting them.

As Mao Tse-tung had observed, the populace is to the guerilla the same way as water is to fish. The Government of Vietnam therefore intended to separate the "guerilla fish" from the "populace water" by separating the guerillas from the people. The government expected that the strategic hamlets would provide the basis for popular anti-guerilla action that would then become the basis of the drive to rid the country of the Viet Cong insurgents. Pham Chung provided a comprehensive list of how the strategic hamlets could upset Communist tactics in the countryside. The expected effects included:

a. Neutralizing the Viet Cong tactic of hiding and dispersing in the hamlets.
b. Depriving the Viet Cong of favourable areas for troop concentration.
c. Depriving the insurgents of the element of surprise.
d. Denying the communists of their chief source of food supply and recruitment.
e. Making the communist scheme of destroying the administrative mechanism of the government more difficult to attain.[61]

In order to achieve security in the countryside, the Government of Vietnam announced its intention to alter military techniques and tactics from conventional warfare to counterguerilla warfare. The objective was to create an infrastructure for popular counterguerilla action that was to become the basis of the drive to rid the country of the

Viet Cong insurgents. Six organizations were given various responsibilities to conduct counterguerilla warfare. The regular force Rangers, especially trained and organized into independent companies, were to attack and check the enemy in his own territory. Commandos, constituted of either military or paramilitary forces, were the next level down and were to operate boldly and with mobility in localized areas. The Civil Guard were responsible to man fixed posts outside of hamlets and maintain night patrols throughout the countryside. The Self Defence Corps and the Police were responsible for security within the hamlet and the area immediately surrounding them. The final element of the military plan was Malayan-type fortified villages which, when built in areas where the enemy was concentrated, would isolate the insurgents.[62] In this way the Strategic Hamlet Program would relieve a heavy burden on the armed forces and carry out a function for which the conventional forces were not well-equipped. Completed hamlets would also act as advance posts of the armed forces, providing them with camouflage, supplies and information.[63]

Priorities for economic and community development were assigned to the promotion of rural industries, cooperative institutions, and the full development of local resources.[64] It was expected that most of these economic programs would be backed by the United States.

Strategic hamlets were to form the base of a new scale of values, founded on civic values and dedication to

the common good.[65] These new social values were communicated to the peasant primarily through the difficult philosophical concepts of personalism.

Government statements expressed the intention to realize democracy in the strategic hamlets through the election of local government representatives. Elected councils had been abolished in 1956 when the government, in an attempt to extend its authority, had sought to centralize national government.[66] Twelve representatives would be responsible for public affairs in the hamlet. They would operate under village by-laws establishing the legal framework for democracy. It was suggested that suitable laws would preclude arbitrary arrest or imprisonment, require equal rights and duties for all, and give priority of benefits to those who worked enthusiastically and effectively.[67]

In the Times of Vietnam of 28 October 1962, which was devoted entirely to the program, it is extremely difficult to extract a common thread or clear aim for the Strategic Hamlet Program. Extravagant claims were made as to what the program would be able to achieve in all aspects of Vietnamese life. Part of this can be explained by the high hopes held by the regime and by the government's attempt to convey its enthusiasm to the people. Part of this lack of clear definition must also be attributed to the lack of a clearly defined, realistic aim for the program as a whole.

As has been illustrated, the program meant many different things to the different groups and individuals involved.

During 1962, a broad consensus on the concept developed, and an overall plan emerged. There remained, however, different perceptions as to overall aims for the strategic hamlets and the implementation of the program. The United States was primarily concerned with providing security for the population and the implementation of political and social reforms. A feature of U.S. support was that it was marked by a lack of cohesion and uniformity. The military was reluctant to place too much importance on the internal security problem, seeing the primary threat to South Vietnam as a conventional military threat. Opposed to this view were many of the civilian agencies of the United States Government who identified the primary threat as a lack of development in the country and limited popular support for President Diem. Diem, while using grand rhetoric to support the American intentions, was in reality more interested in extending his control and influence throughout the countryside. The diversity of expectations and varying degrees of support was to plague the Strategic Hamlet Program throughout its short life.

STRATEGIC HAMLETS BEGIN

The Strategic Hamlet Program had rather humble and mixed beginnings. As has been observed, they were underway as early as May 1961, and in fact the final program grew from these early attempts. Admittedly the program received

a push on 3 January 1962 when Nhu began a publicity campaign to announce the implementation of the Strategic Hamlet Program to cover the approximately 16,000 hamlets in the country.[68] As far as the American advisers were concerned though, there was still much work to be done on the final shape of the program. Nhu's announcement was one month before Roger Hilsman's strategic concept was submitted and well before any significant levels of U.S. support were made available. Even though Nhu's proposals were ambitious (he set a timetable of 14 months), there was much more development to be done before the final shape of the program was to be determined. At this early stage, the U.S. did not appear to have a firm position on the program when it came time to support the initial efforts in Binh Duong Province, which commenced on 22 March 1962:

> Thus, the U.S. came to a roundabout decision to support as a "test" of what would later be called the "strategic hamlet program" an operation about whose details they knew little, in an area that all recognized to be difficult, because it allegedly represented a long-sought example of Government of Vietnam initiative in planning and civil-military preparation.[69]

Full levels of U.S. support for the program were not to be achieved until late in 1962, well after many of the initial programs had begun. Thus, during the period from January 1962 until October 1962, there was continued discussion and debate on the final shape of the program. This did not slow the early, almost reckless efforts to build hamlets.

ENDNOTES

[1]Joseph J. Zasloff, "The Problem of South Vietnam," Commentary (February 1962), 126.

[2]Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War, Executive and Legislative Roles and Relationships Part II 1961-1964, report prepared by William Conrad Gibbons, 98th Cong., 2d sess., 1984, Senate Print 98-185 Pt. 2, p 104.

[3]William A. Nighswonger, "Rural Pacification in Vietnam, 1962-1965" (Ph.D. diss., The American University, 1966), 72-73.

[4]Robert Thompson, Make For the Hills (London: Leo Cooper, 1989), 129.

[5]C.L.Cooper, J.E. Corson, and L.J. Legere, The American Experience with Pacification in Vietnam, Volume II Report R-185A, AD A024 084, (Arlington: Institute for Defense Analysis, 1972), 162.

[6]Nighswonger, "Rural Pacification in Vietnam, 1962-1965", 82.

[7]Noel Barber, The War Of The Running Dogs (New York: Weybright and Talley, 1972), 100.

[8]There is a strong argument to suggest that the root causes of the insurgency were not eliminated under President Magsaysay. Today, the Philippines continue to endure problems of insurgency under the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP). The formation of the CPP can be directly linked to ex members of the Huks and the causes they fight for are similar to those of the Huk era.

[9]Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War, Executive and Legislative Roles and Relationships Part I 1945-1961, report prepared by William Conrad Gibbons, 98th Cong., 2d sess., 1984, Senate Print 98-185 Pt. 1, p 315.

[10]Neil Sheehan, A Bright Shining Lie (New York: Random House, 1988), 138.

[11]Paper prepared by the Country Team Staff Committee, "Basic Counterinsurgency Plan for Viet-Nam," Saigon, 4 January 1961, in Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume 1, Vietnam 1961, Department of State Publication 9625, (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1988), 1. This collection of State Department documents is hereafter referred to as DSP 9625.

[12]Ibid.

[13]Ronald H. Spector, Advice and Support: The Early Years 1941-1960 (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, United States Army, 1983), 372.

[14]Telegram, Department of State to the Embassy in Vietnam, 20 May 1961, in DSP 9625, 140.

[15]Senator Gravel Edition, The Pentagon Papers Volume II (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 138.

[16]Letter, Vietnam and United States Special Financial Groups to President Diem and President Kennedy, 14 July 1961, by Vu Quoc Thuo, Chairman and Eugene Staley, Chairman, in Congress, House, Committee on Armed Services, United States Vietnam Relations 1945-1967, Book 11, The Kennedy Administration: January 1961 - November 1963, (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1971), 183. This collection of DOD documents is hereafter referred to as PP, DOD.

[17]Paper, Members of the Taylor Mission, "Evaluation and Conclusions," Attachment 2, to Letter From the President's Military Representative to the President, 3 November 1961, DSP 9625, 491.

[18]"National Security Action Memorandum No. 111," 22 November 1961, DSP 9625, 656.

[19]"Memorandum of Understanding," Enclosure to Letter from the Ambassador in Vietnam to President Diem, 5 December 1961, DSP 9625, 714.

[20]Gravel, Pentagon Papers, 139.

[21]Memorandum, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff's Special Assistant to the Chairman, 18 December 1961, DSP 9625, 740.

[22]Letter, Political Adviser of the Commander in Chief, Pacific to the Director of the Vietnam Task Force, 18 December 1961, DSP 9625, 742.

[23]Telegram, Chief of the Military Advisory Assistance Group in Vietnam to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 27 December 1961, DSP 9625, 765.

[24]Gravel, Pentagon Papers, 142.

[25]Ibid.

[26]Roger Hilsman, To Move a Nation (Garden City: Doubleday and Company, 1967), 424.

[27]Ibid, 433

[28]Dorothy J.C. Donnelly, American Policy in Vietnam: A Perceptual Analysis of the Domino Theory and Enemy Based on the Pentagon Papers (Ph.D. diss., University of Pittsburgh, University Microfilms International, 1980), 210.

[29]Hilsman, To Move a Nation, 426.

[30]David Halberstam, The Best and the Brightest (New York: Random House, 1973), 183.

[31]Ibid, 185.

[32]Andrew F. Krepinevich, The United States Army in Vietnam: Counterinsurgency Doctrine and the Concept of War Study, U.S. Military Academy, West Point N.Y., 25-26. Quoted in Waghelstein John D. "Post-Vietnam Counterinsurgency Doctrine" Military Review, Volume LXV No. 5, May 1985, 45.

[33]Douglas S. Blaufarb, The Counterinsurgency Era (New York: The Free Press, 1977), 119.

[34]Ibid.

[35]Hilsman, To Move a Nation, 465-466. Hilsman's criticism of lack of control was to be incorporated in the design of the Civil Operations Rural Development Support (CORDS) program which had very clear cut command responsibilities.

[36]Thompson, Make for the Hills, 123.

[37]"British Advisers in S. Vietnam", Times (London), 2 October 1961, 12g.

[38]Ibid.

[39]Gravel, Pentagon Papers, 139.

[40]"Memorandum for President Diem" 11 November 1961, from R.G.K. Thompson, in PP, DOD, Book 11, 347.

[41]Ibid.

[42]Telegram from the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State, 30 November 1961, DSP 9625, 698-700.

[43]Gravel, Pentagon Papers, 141

[44]Ibid, 142.

[45]Thompson, Make for the Hills, 122.

[46]"British Mission to South Vietnam", Times (London), 18 September 1961, 9d.

[47]Dennis J. Duncanson, Government and Revolution in Vietnam (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 311.

[48]Thompson, Make for the Hills, 129.

[49]Duncanson, Government and Revolution in Vietnam, 314.

[50]Gravel, Pentagon Papers, 139.

[51]Halberstam, The Best and the Brightest, 182.

[52]Gravel, Pentagon Papers, 147.

[53]Nighswonger, "Rural Pacification in Vietnam, 1962-1965", 74.

[54]Gene Gregory, "The Strategic Hamlet: Edifice of Revolution," The Times of Vietnam Magazine, 28 October 1962, Volume IV, Number 43: 7. This magazine is hereafter referred to as TVN.

[55]William Colby, Lost Victory (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1989), 101.

[56]Frances Fitzgerald, Fire in the Lake (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1972), 95.

[57]Denis Warner, The Last Confucian (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1963), 17.

[58]Thompson, Make for the Hills, 130.

[59]Gene Gregory, "The Strategic Hamlet: Edifice of Revolution," TVN, 7.

[60]Ibid 6.

[61]Pham Chung, Analysis of the Long-Range Military, Economic, Political and Social Effects of the Strategic Hamlet Program in Vietnam (Washington, D.C.: Advanced Research Projects Agency, Office of the Secretary for Defense, 1964), 94-102.

[62]Gene Gregory, "The Strategic Hamlet - In the Perspective of Vietnamese History," TVN, 37-38

[63]Gregory, "The Strategic Hamlet: Edifice of Revolution," Ibid, 7.

[64]Ibid.

[65]Address of President Ngo Dinh Diem to the National Assembly, 1 October 1962, Ibid, 40.

[66]Robert Scigliano, South Vietnam: Nation Under Stress (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1963), 32.

[67]"The Creation of a Strategic Hamlet," TVN, 29.

[68]Duncanson, Government and Revolution in Vietnam, 316.

[69]Gravel, Pentagon Papers, 144.

CHAPTER 4

BUILDING THE STRATEGIC HAMLETS

Early in 1962, even as the strategic hamlets were being built, there was less than universal agreement on either their goals or the plan for their implementation. What was generally understood was that they were an attempt to extend the influence of the government and counter the actions of the Viet Cong. In general, hamlets were to be regrouped into fortified and more readily defendable settlements. Once this regrouping was done, economic, social, and political reforms could be undertaken. The program was intended to weed out Viet Cong agents and sympathizers, to re-establish and improve local government administration, to improve the government's image, and to align the peasants more closely with the government.[1]

CONSTRUCTION GOALS

As a means of achieving these overall aims, the government issued its goals for the construction of strategic hamlets by number, by date, and by geographic area.

The government planned to create between 11,000 and 12,000 hamlets, enough to shelter the entire population.[2]

The schedule called for 7,000 hamlets to be completed by the end of 1962, with the rest to be completed by early 1964. According to government figures the program got off to an encouraging beginning. By the end of September 1962, the Interior Department claimed a total of 3,235 completed strategic hamlets with 4,322,234 people housed in them. It was expected that by the end of 1962, two thirds of the population would be living in safety in strategic or fortified hamlets.[3] On 7 October 1962, just a few days after the Department of Interior issued the figures for 4.3 million people in hamlets, President Diem claimed a total of 7,267,517 people housed in strategic hamlets, completed or under construction.[4] It is common to find similar discrepancies and contr ictions in government figures. Figures used by Robert Thompson in a September 1963 report to Diem do not correspond with any of the figures provided above.[5]

These discrepancies raise a number of points. First, the figures were not presented uniformly. At times, figures were presented for completed hamlets; at other times, they were presented for completed hamlets and those under construction. Second, it is clear that construction goals were accelerated as the program progressed and more funds became available. This was especially the case after May 1962, when U.S. funds were readily available. Third, information received from the field was usually exaggerated and innacurate, concerned more with quantity than quality.

Milton Osborne cited a number of examples of false reporting and attributed it to a lack of understanding of the concept of strategic hamlets by provincial officials and to the pressure for results from the President and his brother.[6]

While Diem and Nhu viewed the rate of construction as a measure of success, there was another less encouraging effect. The rate of construction became so great that available resources were stretched to the limit. Thus the hamlets were poorly constructed and inadequately protected. This meant that it became difficult to convince the peasants to participate. Osborne, in reference to a speech by Colonel Pham Ngoc Thao, a senior assistant to Nhu, suggested that the rate of erection of hamlets jeopardized the whole program.[7] Denis Warner also emphasized the speed at which the program proceeded, suggesting that the Government went into mass production:

> Without warning, preparation, or consent, peasants saw their homes, and often their belongings, burned behind them.[8]

There were a variety of ideas on where to start the program. Thompson, when submitting the "Delta Plan" to Diem, suggested that a start be made in only one area. He proposed the Delta area to the south and west of Saigon. To Thompson, the area north of Saigon and the Highlands were less secure and would require more specific military measures. Thompson also recommended that the government take things slowly and build the hamlets properly, making

them worthwhile for the peasants to defend. These recommendations were consistent with Thompson's experience in Malaya, where he was an advocate of the "oil spot" method. Under this method the government would establish itself in an area and then slowly extend its control out over the surrounding countryside, just as oil spreads on the surface of water.

As it was, hamlets were begun in widely scattered areas. It was not until August 1962, well after many hamlets were begun, that efforts were made to detail a countrywide priority plan. Under this plan, issued by the Interagency Committee for Province Rehabilitation, four priority zones were detailed, and within each zone provinces were allocated a priority for the purpose of controlling the allocation of resources and conforming with the national plan.[9]

Even after the introduction of this national plan, there remained little order to the whole process. Hilsman made this point in a December 1962 Memorandum to the Secretary of the Department of State, in which he viewed the systematic integration of military and political resources as providing encouraging results. He did however, qualify his observation by the comment:

> However its limited application to relatively few provinces has not yet appreciably altered the balance between the government and the Viet Cong in the countryside.[10]

The confusing and haphazard nature of the implementation of the Strategic Hamlet Program should be attributed to the lack of an overall strategic plan and properly coordinated centralized direction. While an administration system existed from the highest levels of government, and while most support came from the Presidential Palace, implementation decisions were mostly made at the provincial level. It was at this level that resources were available and the actual decisions on where to construct the hamlets were made. This disjointed method of planning and construction effectively did away with any advantage which might have been gained from the "oil spot" method proposed by Thompson. A CIA Memorandum to the Secretary of Defense dated 13 July 1962, touched on this topic and on the lack of integration of the plan. The memorandum stated that one major weakness of the program was the "hit-and-miss" construction effort that resulted in insufficient integration of the hamlet defences into the overall district and province security plans. This meant that until there were considerably more strategic hamlets, the existing ones, which were often isolated, would be exposed to Viet Cong attack. The CIA memorandum stated:

> In our view, best way [to] use strategic hamlets as tactic in counterinsurgency program is, when possible, to make their phased construction integral part [of] broader pacification programs extending, where practicable, to province-wide scope.[11]

ORGANIZATION TO BUILD HAMLETS

Given the involvement of multiple government bodies and the existence of multiple aims for the strategic hamlets, it is hardly surprising that a plethora of organizations were established to implement the program. An extensive administrative system was established from Saigon all the way down through the province and village to the hamlet. In keeping with Diem's overall efforts to extend government control, there was an attempt to retain a large degree of centralized control, exercised primarily from the Palace and especially by Nhu. In reality this control had more to do with the rate of construction than the quality of the strategic hamlets and their location.

President Diem established a special "Interministerial Committee for Strategic Hamlets" on 3 February 1962. This was seven months after the first official references to the scheme appeared and after the construction of the initial hamlets. The committee was given the responsibility of coordinating the program on a countrywide basis. As befitting a program with broad aims, the Ministeries of the Interior, Defense, Education, Civic Action, and Rural Affairs were all represented.[12] The Minister of the Interior was the Secretary General, but there was no chairman appointed, as this function was exercised by Nhu, who at this early stage did not want to have his position formalized.[13] Nhu was in reality the man who operated the scheme.[14] William A. Nighswonger assessed

that this committee "was largely a figurehead, engaging in the 'post decisional participation' typical of the regime."[15] Nhu tended to ignore the established administrative structure, preferring to issue orders directly to the province chiefs.[16]

The Interministerial Committee attempted to bring some order to the scheme by allocating priority of construction, by preparing plans and regulations for the implementation of the hamlets, and by conducting training courses for officials. The effect of these activities, and the delegation of responsibility, must be questioned in the light of Nhu's intentions for the scheme. He viewed it as a way of extending government control over the countryside. Even if the regions were free to exercise autonomy, the army commanders and administrators in the provinces had been appointed by Diem or Nhu and owed them allegiance. As a means of ensuring his control, Nhu toured the countryside to express his views on the program. To him the program had three aspects: first, the strategic hamlet was to provide defence against outside attack by organizing its own militia in the Republican Youth; second, it was to be a vehicle for the betterment of village life; finally, it was to be the vehicle of political and social change, replacing the old village hierarchy by a system that rewarded people who acted in the interests of the hamlet.[17]

Even though the region was not part of the civilian administrative structure of South Vietnam, it was part of

the military chain of command and as such assumed responsibilities for the implementation of the program. The Interministerial Committee delegated responsibilities to regions where regular army divisions were under the command of the Regional Tactical Commander.[18] Regional Tactical Commanders provided the equipment and military forces necessary to secure the area while the strategic hamlets were being constructed. The Regional Tactical Commanders also headed up regional committees which established inspection teams responsible for reporting on the progress of strategic hamlets to the Interministerial Committee.[19]

At the provincial level, committees headed by the province chief were established to carry out the directives of the Interministerial Committee and to develop plans for the individual provinces. This important role of the province chief did not last long. By Presidential Decree of 12 July 1962, division tactical area committees for strategic hamlets were established, with Army division commanders as chairmen. These were the commanders from the regional level discussed above. This change recognized the province chief's difficulties in obtaining operational support from the military.[20] By establishing the army in such an important role, the provision of operational support was made easier. The question remains as to how enthusiastically and how astutely the division commanders were able to discharge their responsibilities to what was primarily an economic, social, and political program. As

the region was a considerably bigger area than the province, the military was also forced to spread its resources over a much larger area. Certainly, as the security situation worsened, the amount of time and resources the division commanders could devote to the project were constrained. They were generally not trained for these activities and were prone to view the situation in the countryside as a security problem rather than a social and economic problem and the solution as primarily a military one.

The planning and execution of the program was most important at the district level. Procedures were detailed in the Times of Vietnam of 28 October 1962.[21] As a first step, the district chief would meet with the province chief, local military officers, and the province committee in charge of strategic hamlets to discuss the implementation of the program in his district. Once back in his district, the district chief would organize "Strategic Hamlet Construction Teams," which were assigned to the hamlets to be constructed. Each team of ten to twenty men was made up of representatives from the Civil Guard, the Self Defense Corps, the Police, the Information Service, Civic Action personnel, the Agricultural Credit agency, and Public Health and Education personnel. The team was allocated a military unit to protect it and would visit the village for anywhere from ten days to a month.[22]

After arriving in its assigned hamlet, the first task of the team was the installation of defensive positions

(usually a fence) to check enemy infiltration into the hamlet. At no time was it intended that these rudimentary measures be able to repel large-scale attacks by enemy forces. They were meant only for local security and to help control infiltration. One member of the team was designated as the security member, and he was responsible for the eradication of Viet Cong infiltrators and the control of the population. This involved compiling identity files and family records for each house, photographing each person, investigating the financial status of each family, determining the rate of literacy, and issuing plastic covered identity cards.

Others on the construction team organized the people into civic groups as a means of creating a collective life among the inhabitants in an attempt to further isolate them from the Viet Cong. Organizations included the Farmers Association, the Women's Solidarity Movement, the Self Defense Corps, and the Republican Youth. These organizations were seen as the first step in the implementation of democractic principles in the hamlet. With the completion of security measures, a comprehensive social and political program was to be initiated. Hamlet chiefs were either elected or appointed by the district chief and, together with three assistants (one for economic and social affairs, another for administration and political affairs, and a third for youth and security), the four men made up the "hamlet management board" or council.[23] These

actions were followed by the election of village councils. An assembly of hamlet chiefs, association leaders, village councilmen, and the Chief of District then met to draft village bylaws intended to provide a framework for democracy in the village. As a final step a general assembly was held during which the Strategic Hamlet Construction Team transferred responsibility for the management of the strategic hamlet to the elected hamlet council.

U.S AID AND ADVICE

Soon after Roger Hilsman submitted his strategic concept, and other officials had expressed their support for the new pacification program, the United States took steps to formalize its commitment. In March 1962, the U.S. Embassy in Saigon established an Interagency Committee for Province Rehabilitation (COPROR) to deal with the counterinsurgency problem and to act as a counterpart to the Vietnamese Interministerial Committee. The deputy chief of mission chaired the committee, which had representatives from U.S. agencies in South Vietnam. Like so many early country team efforts, internal coordination was largely dependent on informal contacts between agencies, as no secretariat was established for the COPROR.[24]

Through work by the Agency for International Development, an Office of Rural Affairs was established in the U.S. Embassy, with Rufus Phillips as its head. Administered through the United States Operations Mission (USOM), the Office of Rural Affairs was involved in

developing administrative procedures at the national level. Under this system, province chiefs provided comprehensive provincial plans that were reviewed by the Interministerial Committee, the Office of Rural Affairs and the MAAG's Strategic Hamlets Division. Following the presentation of provincial plans, joint U.S.-GVN teams visited the provinces to work out any problems and prepare a budget. Once this was done, completed plans and budgets were submitted to the U.S. Interagency Committee and the Government of Vietnam Interministerial Committee.[25]

The Office of Rural Affairs was established, with a view towards counterinsurgency principles, as an agency to help persuade the people to support the government and resist the Viet Cong. It maintained a strong emphasis on field support and was highly decentralized in order to ensure close and responsive support for the strategic hamlets. Phillips, who had served in Vietnam in 1954 as an Army lieutenant, developed techniques for coordination with military and propaganda operations. These techniques were meant to ensure that the creation of a strategic hamlet would also bring the people supplies and material as well as physical security and information explaining the program.[26]

Strategic hamlets began before substantial numbers of U.S. advisers filtered down to provincial levels. Thus, the first advisers were generally the MAAG sector advisers who were followed in late 1962 by USOM representatives. The sector advisers served as personal military counsellors to

the Province Chief and, along with the USOM representative, participated in the planning and approval of strategic hamlets as members of the Provincial Rehabilitation Committee. This committee consisted of the Province Chief and the MACV and USOM advisers.[27] It was responsible for the planning of provincial activities based on the types of programs to be conducted and the financial and material resources available. Even after a short time in the field, the U.S. advisers became concerned with the amount of waste, corruption, and bureaucratic incompetence they observed; so they took steps to try and rectify the situation. Aid agreements were negotiated at the national level, but funds were made available by agreements through USOM with each province chief. This method of providing aid directly to the province was developed to ensure timeliness and a greater degree of control over the application of funds.[28] Duncanson argued that by avoiding the ministries in Saigon and the special secretariat, the United States could show its dissatisfaction at Diem's rejection of requests for reform as well as its distrust of Nhu.[29]

USOM and MACV advisers had different roles, responsibilities, and sources of funds. The role of the MACV adviser was "to foster the improvement of training and operating effectiveness of province armed forces, intelligence and pacification activities as a whole."[30] As USOM was an economic agency, the role of the USOM representative differed markedly. It was through these

efforts to provide advice and assistance on a decentralized basis that the U.S. first became involved in providing advice at the provincial level.[31]

A TYPICAL STRATEGIC HAMLET

Just as it was difficult to define a typical hamlet, it is difficult to define a typical strategic hamlet. Variations between hamlets existed because of differences in the security threat, available resources and the enthusiasm of the people to construct and develop the hamlets. There were, however, common attributes.

John C. Donnell and Gerald C. Hickey provided a useful description. They observed three types of strategic hamlets. The first type was the heavily fortified hamlets found in the contested areas around Saigon. In these hamlets much of the area was surrounded by extensive earthworks, including a ditch about five feet deep and a rampart ten feet wide at the top. Both the ditch and rampart were studded with bamboo spears. Outside the ditch there was generally a fence of either bamboo, wooden pickets, thorn hedges, or barbed wire. In the second type, observed in Vinh Long Province, which had less of a security problem, the hamlets were divided into defensive blocks which comprised most of the residential areas. These blocks were afforded defence by bamboo spears embedded in the ground, thorn hedges, portable steel spike boards, and a few hand grenades planted as land mines. The third type, observed in Kien Hoa Province were the least heavily

defended. In these, the fortifications and defensive devices were usually limited to the military post.[32]

In a 3 December 1962 Research Memorandum, The Situation and Short-Term Prospects in Vietnam, Roger Hilsman also gave a good idea of the differences between strategic hamlets. To Hilsman, they varied widely in all aspects. The most effectively organized hamlets were those in the areas where integrated and systematic military-political pacification operations were undertaken. These hamlets had effective defences, radio communications were provided, and officials had begun the process of improving life for the peasants. In other hamlets fortifications were inadequate, there were no communications, defence forces were under-strength and poorly equipped, and hamlet officials continued to be appointed rather than elected. Continuing with his observations, Hilsman observed that while morale was improving in many hamlets because of the security they offered, there were problems. These problems involved reports that government officials were demanding too much forced labour and material from the peasants and offering little in the way of compensation. As a result the peasant's ability to earn a living declined because of the time spent in constructing the strategic hamlets. Hilsman concluded one section of the memorandum with the observation that the reports he was receiving also included comments on the government being more concerned with "controlling the

hamlet population than with providing services and improving living conditions."[33]

Donnell and Hickey also provided a close look at the difficulties experienced by the peasants as the strategic hamlets were being built. In some areas farmers were forced to make considerable contributions to the construction of the hamlets. They were obliged to provide communal labour, bamboo and other materials, money for the purchase of defence materials, and give up paddy land for the construction of earthworks. Communal labour schedules were heavy and farmers complained that crop yields were drastically reduced because they had to work long hours on communal projects. Another difficulty was that villagers were often required to provide labour to assist in the construction of neighbouring strategic hamlets, for which they received no reward in kind or money. In many cases villagers were also unhappy that they did not receive the payment due to them for either their work or as compensation for moving to the new hamlets. Donnell and Hickey made repeated mention of this and, in each case, refer to the claims of local officials that these payments had in fact been made.[34]

HAMLET ORGANIZATIONS

As a result of the decision in the 1950s to retain a large army with a focus on protecting the country from an invasion from the north, the primary responsibility for internal security fell on the Civil Defense Guard (CDG) and

the Self Defense Corps (SDC). Even in the early 1960s, when there was a new emphasis on counterinsurgency, there remained a clear distinction between the military forces and these militia groups. The militia were still to focus at the village level, where the greatest threat was. The intention was to relieve the regular army forces from static defence duties, thereby enabling the army to assume the initiative against the Communists. Neither the CDG nor the SDC were properly equipped or trained to perform this internal security function. The CDG had originally been prepared as a rural police force by the Michigan State University group who provided contract advice to the Government of Vietnam during the 1950s. By 1961, even though changes and improvements were evident and both groups were established with substantial numbers, there remained significant deficiencies.

The Civil Defense Guard was a voluntary area defence force, numbering about 50,000. Organized in units up to battalion size, it operated as a regional reaction force and was, in effect, the province chief's own military force. The ability of the CDG to perform this function was extremely limited due to their severe lack of mobility and inadequate communications within the province. It performed more capably when used to protect key installations and man small fixed posts near the hamlets of a night. It was also used to good effect to maintain night patrols throughout the countryside.

The Self Defense Corps numbered about 60,000 and provided the military basis of the strategic hamlet system. The Corps was responsible for security within the hamlet and the area immediately around it. They performed tasks such as guarding public buildings and bridges, escorting village officials in unsafe areas and patrolling the village area. Poorly trained, poorly equipped and often terribly isolated, the SDC became the primary target of Viet Cong attacks. In the first six months of 1962 the SDC lost 1,600 killed compared to 400 for the army.[35] On 11 May 1962, Homer Bigart, reporting in the New York Times, gave a clear example of the isolation faced by the SDC. Reporting on Secretary of Defense McNamara's visit to Lung Son strategic hamlet, Bigart detailed how the hamlet had no radio and that it would take a runner four hours to bring reinforcements. In an attempt to overcome this isolation, the USOM began a five million dollar program to provide 2,000 transistor radios to the villages and hamlets during 1963.[36] Even when help was summoned by radio it often took an inordinately long time for the Army to arrive.

Nhu saw that the Republican Youth, which was essentially a political organization, would be able to play a role in the defence of the strategic hamlets. Undoubtedly, he also saw a larger role for the organization which he founded in February 1961. The Republican Youth was for uniformed young men and, like many of the other organizations formed by Diem or Nhu, was a way of extending

control throughout the countryside.[37] Diem's view was that the Republican Youth could be utilized for any purpose for which organization and discipline were required. Accordingly, if there was not already a branch of the Republican Youth in a hamlet, one of the first tasks for the hamlet construction team was to raise one. Minimal training was conducted in military and political affairs, at the end of which the Republican Youth became part of the warning and guard system.[38] For example in Vinh Long, they organized an alarm and evacuation system as well as a reporting and registration system.[39]

During the period 1961 to 1963, the National Police were not active in the rural areas of South Vietnam. An increase of National Police from 21,000 to 72,000 had been proposed in 1961, but it was not approved until 1963. Thus, the National Police were not to play a significant role in the Strategic Hamlet Program. This was unfortunate since the training manual for police, issued by the Public Safety Division of the USOM in January 1964, was a remarkably clear and sensible document. The manual dealt extensively with police responsibilities in population and resources control. It also proposed that the job of the police in the strategic hamlet was "to maintain the internal security of the hamlet and keep a constant surveillance over the movements of the people in and out of its limits."[40]

Throughout the period under study, police presence in the countryside was limited to largely untrained village

officials. These officials were supplemented by the militia groups and Republican Youth, themselves largely untrained and inexperienced. Some efforts had been made during 1961 to train officials in population and resources control methods, but they were abandoned because of both insufficient funds and an internal conflict within the USOM between Rural Affairs and Public Safety on the question of the methods of control.[41] Consequently, the Strategic Hamlet Program operated without a coordinated resources control program. Because the control of resources was one of the key elements for ensuring the separation of the Viet Cong from the material support provided by the peasants, this was a serious flaw in the whole program.

Apart from the organizations mentioned above, there were many other organizations and associations in the villages and hamlets, some of which had lesser roles in the political and social development of the strategic hamlets. Even though the Michigan State University study of the village of My Thuan was completed prior to the Strategic Hamlet Program, it provides a valuable outline of organizations at the village level. Not all organizations appeared in every village, but the study was representative of the types of organizations that might be found. They included farmers associations and cooperatives, social welfare committees, farmers unions, community development committees and student-parent associations. There were also political and religious groups, including the National

Revolutionary Movement and the Government Employee League. The Michigan State University study observed that the government overtly attempted to replace some of the older institutions with new government ones. It was thought that the new institutions would aid security and be better able to handle the problems of development in the countryside. The new groups were "generally poorly developed, ill-defined, over-lapping in function, or not functioning at all."[42]

SELF-SUFFICIENCY

While there was an effort to provide adequate and appropriate organizations and resources to support the strategic hamlets, there were limitations. Some of these limitations were the result of inadequate resources and poor planning. As has been observed, strategic hamlets were under way well before the U.S. made the decision to provide widespread support to the program. Nighswonger refers to the period before January 1963, when U.S. Military Assistance Program and Agency for International Development funds became available, as the "self sufficient" period.[43] During this period, available resources were extremely limited and, apart from the large coordinated operations, villagers received little in the way of compensation for their land or payment for their labour.

There was one other limitation which was an integral part of the whole concept of strategic hamlets. It was the emphasis on self reliance, which was very much a part of the

personalist philosophy espoused by Diem and Nhu. This limitation was also called "self-sufficiency." As Nhu explained, the three basic purposes for strategic hamlets were defence, the betterment of village life, and a vehicle for political and social change. Under the personalist philosophy, these basic purposes had three corresponding sufficiencies; self-sufficiency in organization, self-sufficiency in equipment, and self-sufficiency in ideology.[44] Under this concept of self-sufficiency, Nhu was convinced that the people had to do for themselves what they wanted done. The government would help as it could, but the people should be prepared to shoulder the burden for their own defence and development. Nhu saw self-sufficiency as an appropriate philosophy for the peasants "who were to become aware of their dignity and worth [and would thus become] motivated to contribute the necessary resources by their own labor and willingness to serve."[45]

While self-sufficiency could be justified in terms of the personalist philosophy, it could also be explained by a lack of available resources and the government's inability to do anything positive to actually improve village life. Yet another reason for self-sufficiency can be seen in the insensitivity of the regime in Saigon to the needs of the peasant in the countryside. Nhu expressed a reluctance to assist the villagers, believing that if he satisfied their demands they would return with more demands. Eventually he acquiesced and provided services to the villages, but only

under pressure from, and with money and resources supplied primarily by the United States. Douglas Pike emphasized Nhu's personalist feelings in quoting Nhu's reply to a group of villagers who had asked for aid to build a new school:

> The government's means are stretched now to their limit. Do not rely on outside aid. First build a revolution within yourself. Then build the school with your own hands.[46]

Self-sufficiency was nothing new to rural Vietnamese. In their villages and hamlets they had existed for years without government support or interference. With the introduction of strategic hamlets, there came a new twist to this old relationship. Under the Strategic Hamlet Program, and its efforts to extend control throughout the country, the government became more intrusive in the everyday life of the villager. This may have been acceptable had the government been sensitive to the needs of the villagers and offered something in return. This was not the case. Even in the important realm of arming the villagers to defend themselves, self-sufficiency had an effect: the hamlet militia would be loaned their weapons for a period of six months. The arms were then to be returned. Nhu assumed that after six months the militia would have captured enough weapons to arm themselves. Peasants were also required to make heavy contributions of labour, material, and money to the construction of the hamlets. Nhu envisaged contributions taking the form of five to ten days of labour

and from fifty to one thousand piasters from each citizen.[47] Perhaps the greatest cost to the villagers was that, under the strict control measures necessary to ensure security, it seemed to them that they had lost their freedom.

COORDINATED EFFORTS

The first large-scale attempt to bring the varied security, economic, social, and political threads of the Strategic Hamlet Program together was "Operation Sunrise," which began in the last week of March 1962 in Binh Duong Province, north of Saigon. This operation was especially significant as it was the first time the governments of South Vietnam and the United States were to combine their efforts. It was also significant in that it was well covered by the press. Homer Bigart, in his reports to the New York Times, presented the scheme in increasingly critical terms. In one report he called it "a harsh and drastic military measure that could mark a turning point in Vietnam's struggle against the Communist guerillas."[48]

Four hamlets were selected in what Thompson saw as the "toughest area" on the fringe of War Zone D.[49] The area was heavily infested with Viet Cong and served as a crossroads of Viet Cong communications. This province was selected after considerable debate over where to start the project. In his "Delta Plan," Thompson had proposed starting in the more secure delta area south of Saigon. American advisers were at first reluctant to start in the north, but in an effort to encourage a Vietnamese initiative

agreed to this area which Diem saw as more important.[50] The U.S. provided planning, technical aid, and financial support as a means to test the new concept and provide encouragement to the Vietnamese.

"Operation Sunrise", under the command of Brigadier General Van Thanh Cao, consisted of three phases. The first phase was a military manoeuvre to sweep the guerilla forces out of the populated areas. Carried out by the reinforced 5th ARVN Division, the sweep was largely ineffective: among the more than 200 families located in the area, the ARVN division found only 120 males of an age to bear arms. An editorial comment in the Pentagon Papers suggests that this very clearly indicated that a large number had gone over the Viet Cong.[51] In the second phase, government services were to be built up by civil action cadres. The final phase was the establishment of normal government after the civil action cadres moved out.[52]

By selecting a Viet Cong-controlled area the government ensured a difficult start to their official Strategic Hamlet Program. It is questionable whether Binh Duong Province was a suitable area for pacification. This question was reinforced by Homer Bigart, who reported that the objective was to break the threatening arc of guerillas in the forests less than 30 miles from Saigon. This suggests a greater emphasis on the security of Saigon than providing security and development for the people in Binh Duong province. Douglas Blaufarb wrote that neither the

Government of Vietnam nor the U.S. were concerned that to start in this area "would violate some fundamental principles of the new strategy and encounter problems it was not designed to solve."[53]

As the start in the much vaunted project to pacify the country, many would view "Operation Sunrise" as a sample of what was to come. This was unfortunate, as government plans required the resettlement of approximately 1,200 families. In the first attempts the government moved 223 isolated families into a new village called Ben Tuong. Only 70 families volunteered for resettlement, the other 135 families "were herded forcibly from their homes."[54] As the villagers were moved, their homes were burned along with other immovable objects to prevent their use by the Viet Cong. When the peasants arrived in Ben Tuong, they found the village incomplete, and they were obliged to construct much of it themselves. They also found the village to be located so far away from Ben Cat, which was the nearest market town, that they were forced to pay a prohibitive amount for transport to the market.[55]

The U.S. budgeted $300,000 for compensation payments, to be provided to each family on the basis of 1,500 piastres (about $21) for lost property. The United States Information Service (USIS) also published and distributed a free weekly newspaper called, "Towards the Good Life." Douglas Pike was responsible for the production of the paper, which explained that the purpose of "Operation

Sunrise" was to destroy the power of the Viet Cong and to improve living conditions in rural areas of the province.[56] Neither the sum of money nor a newspaper appear to be adequate compensation, especially as the peasants had the price of their new homes deducted from the initial sum received. In the end they received 400 piasters ($5.57) as a cash payment.[57]

Not long after "Operation Sunrise" commenced another operation, called "Operation Sea Swallow" began in Phu Yen Province. Located along the coast in Central Vietnam, Phu Yen was heavily infested with Viet Cong, who exercised considerable control over the province. "Operation Sea Swallow" incorporated some of the lessons of "Operation Sunrise." Denis Warner estimated that it began well and was successful, despite a poor performance by the ARVN and "despite Saigon's almost open hostility to the operation."[58] In this new operation, the province chief and his American advisers were intent on making the program a genuine battle for the hearts and minds of the people. Large sums of money were available for resettlement, medical aid, and security. In addition, field officers insisted that people would not be moved until the resettlement areas were ready and compensation had been paid for destroyed property.[59]

Success had its price. Diem began to feel uncomfortable with "Operation Sea Swallow" because the Americans were too closely associated with the operation, and because the successful resettlement programs were

unfavourably contrasted with the brutal programs of "Operation Sunrise." The province chief fell into disfavour for identifying too closely with the Americans and the Americans were accused of squandering material that was more urgently needed elsewhere.[60] Diem's view of the operation shows a puzzling indifference for a program that gave every indication of being a success. Thompson quoted Diem as saying: "It makes the Americans happy and it does not worry either me or the Vietcong."[61] It must be remembered, though, that this was at a time when Diem was seeking to maintain Vietnamese autonomy over the conduct of the war and was receiving increasing criticism that he was a puppet of the Americans.

Throughout South Vietnam other attempts were made to implement the Strategic Hamlet Program. These went under names such as "Operation Let's Go" in Binh Dinh Province, and "Operation Royal Phoenix" in Quang Nai Province. Thompson viewed these separate operations as a problem. He stated that the authorities could not see the need to organize the program as a methodical campaign to recover and control territory:

> Some Americans got the point sufficiently to coin the phrase "oil spots". The trouble was that every advisory team wanted its own oil spot. The oil spots were soon dotted all over the place.[62]

These separate operations were ample evidence of a lack of a national strategy. Thompson could see nothing

intrinsically wrong with "Operation Sea Swallow," except for the fact that it was not in an important area. It was selected merely because the province authorities were keen to start and the authorities considered it wise to take advantage of this enthusiasm. Similarly, a program was begun in the area around Saigon in the area of the Cao Dai sect because of a local initiative. In this instance, no regard was paid to where the hamlets were located; they were in fact spread over three provinces.[63] While many hamlets were built as part of a coordinated effort, a great many more were built as individual efforts by local authorities in response to the demands for more and more hamlets emanating from Saigon. It was these hamlets that received the least support and assistance, and as a result were generally poorly constructed with little or no local support.

COMPLEMENTARY MEASURES

Even though the strategic hamlets became the focus of government efforts, the Government of Vietnam did not rely entirely on them as the sole means of pacification. There were also a number of other programs which played a role in the overall plan for pacification.

The Government of Vietnam launched its "Chieu Hoi" or Open Arms program in April 1963. It was a formal amnesty program which sought to encourage defections from the Viet Cong. Returnees were granted amnesty and received into special camps where they received medical treatment,

economic help, and training before being released into civilian society or permitted to enlist in the army. Figures for the period up to 18 February 1962 show 12,067 Viet Cong returned to the government side. Bernard Fall observed that, based on the number of weapons handed in (an average of 1 or 2 per 100 returnees), they may not have been hard-core Viet Cong, but more likely peasants caught in the wake of clearing operations.[64]

Like efforts at pacification, attempts at land reform remained as a constant throughout Diem's rule. His efforts at land reform which began in October 1956, were presented as yet another means to achieve pacification in the rural areas. Although government officials held high hopes for land reform, their attempts were largely unsuccessful. Despite early claims of success, it became evident that land reform was not playing an important role in pacification. As a result, Diem announced in 1960 that the land reform program had been completed. Very few peasants had actually benefited from it, and in 1962 there were still 150,000 hectares of undistributed land. Throughout this period, the government was reluctant to grant title to land, and in some areas government regulations on how much rent a tenant had to pay actually meant that tenants were worse off than previously.[65] Viet Cong cadres played on the peasants' concerns over land, and the Viet Cong were instructed to relate every issue to the land problem. They portrayed the strategic hamlet as a means of depriving the peasants of

land and asserted that the government represented the rich landlords. Other Viet Cong actions included claims that the land reform scheme was false, land taxes were unreasonable, and that the best rice land was being confiscated by the U.S.-Diem clique for military bases.[66]

The government also attempted to institute reforms and development projects through all its agencies. These involved agricultural, social, and economic reforms. However, they were however largely subsumed by the enormity of the Strategic Hamlet Program and its voracious appetite for resources. It was not until well into 1964 that individual programs, such as schools at the hamlet level, the distribution of fertilizer, information services, and rural electrification schemes began to stand out as viable pacification schemes.

WHAT MADE A HAMLET A STRATEGIC HAMLET

Keeping entirely in line with the government's vague idea of implementation was the official view of what constituted a strategic hamlet. The six criteria laid down on 19 July 1962, took a very narrow view, dealing only with security measures. The 6 points which indicated that a hamlet was completed were:

> when the people (1) have cleared Communists from the area, and have coordinated population-control measures with the police committee and hamlet chief; (2) have coordinated control of people and resources with the Vietnamese Information Service, indoctrinated the population, and successfully organized all the people; (3) have instructed and divided work of all people as to their obligations

> when disaster strikes; (4) have completed defenses - such as fences, spikes, communications trenches, hidden trenches in all houses; (5) have organized two special forces cells in each hamlet; and (6) have held the election of an advisory council.[67]

Apart from the election of an advisory council these six points make no mention of the economic, social, and political reforms which were the most important part of the whole program. Such a narrow definition allowed the government to claim increasing numbers of completed strategic hamlets at a time when success was measured in quantity rather than quality. It also absolved the government of the responsibility for providing the vastly more expensive and difficult economic, social, and political reforms. What remains is to consider how successful the strategic hamlets were in achieving not only the security aims, but also the aims, as expressed by Diem, of "a political and social revolution which will serve as the foundation of our economic revolution." [68]

ENDNOTES

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[20]Ibid, 169.

[21]"The Creation of a Strategic Hamlet," TVN, 26-28.

[22]Donnell and Hickey, The Vietnamese "Strategic Hamlets": A Preliminary Report, 8.

[23]Ibid, 9.

[24]Nighswonger, "Rural Pacification In Vietnam, 1962-1965", 252

[25]Cooper, Corson, and Legere, The American Experience with Pacification in Vietnam, Volume II, 171.

[26]John Mecklin, Mission in Torment (Garden City: Doubleday and Company, 1965), 68.

[27]Nighswonger, "Rural Pacification In Vietnam, 1962-1965", 117.

[28]Ibid, 109-112.

[29]Duncanson, Government and Revolution in Vietnam, 318.

[30]Nighswonger, "Rural Pacification In Vietnam, 1962-1965", 111.

[31]Cooper, Corson, and Legere, The American Experience with Pacification in Vietnam, Volume II, 170.

[32]Donnell and Hickey, The Vietnamese "Strategic Hamlets": A Preliminary Report, 2ff.

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[34]Donnell and Hickey, The Vietnamese "Strategic Hamlets": A Preliminary Report, 14.

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[36]Homer Bigart, "McNamara Asks Vietnam Chief To Alter Tactics in Struggle," New York Times, 11 May 1962, 3.

[37]Thompson, Defeating Communist Insurgency, 126. Thompson made two observations on the role of the Republican Youth. He argued that it was a mistake to impose political control from the top instead of winning political and popular support from the bottom. His second point was that the use of the Republican Youth created the seeds of conflict in the community between the youth and the traditional elders.

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[68]TVN, 40.

CHAPTER 5

ASSESSMENT

Much was expected of the Strategic Hamlet Program, and for a time, it seemed that much was being achieved. What remains is to consider the program and its failure in bringing about pacification in South Vietnam.

Pacification, as defined in Chapter 1, was the process by which the Government of Vietnam sought to restore and maintain law and order in the countryside. The Strategic Hamlet Program sought to provide sustained protection for the rural population from insurgent threats. It was also intended to engender support for the government by meeting the needs of the people. An effective pacification program should involve all government agencies, civil as well as military, and be properly coordinated, carefully planned, and adequately resourced.

President Diem and his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu presented the Strategic Hamlet Program as a security, economic, social, and political program designed to achieve a "total revolution" in South Vietnam. These four aspects of the program will be examined to assess the performance of the program.

EVALUATION PROCEDURES OF THE TIME

The most obvious problem with evaluating strategic hamlets in the period 1961 to 1963 was the narrow view of what constituted a completed strategic hamlet. In Chapter 4, the six points presented by the government as the criteria for a completed strategic hamlet were noted. Apart from the inclusion of the election of an advisory council, the government's criteria made no mention of the economic, social, and political components of the program. Yet these three components are arguably the most important aspects of any pacification program. To have an inadequate or non-existent means of evaluation did not allow effective monitoring, or any means of modifying or improving the program as it was implemented.[1]

In the early stages of the Strategic Hamlet Program, there was very little attention paid to evaluating the performance of the hamlets in achieving pacification. The program was introduced with a great a deal of hope as a "total revolution" and as a means of averting the increasing Viet Cong threat in the countryside. In this type of environment, it is hardly surprising that the early emphasis was on getting the hamlets completed. This was reinforced by the attitudes of Diem and Nhu, who viewed success in terms of numbers of hamlets completed rather than in terms of a strategic hamlet's ability to ensure effective pacification. Robert Thompson observed in 1966, "No

attention was paid to their purpose: their creation became the purpose in itself."[2]

Staff available to inspect the hamlets were limited and largely inexperienced and untrained. They were also subjected to intense political pressure from Saigon to produce acceptable results. Field inspection teams were established at the regional level, which, as has already been discussed, was part of the military chain of command, rather than the civil administrative chain. At the province level, there were no official inspection teams. William A. Nighswonger observed that the result was that "operationally committed individuals - the cadres, district chiefs, and province chiefs - did most of the inspection."[3]

The combined effect of a largely ineffective evaluation system, intense political pressure and inexperienced staff was inaccurate and inflated figures on the progress of the program. In an informal Agency for International Development paper, USOM officials made particular note of the difficulties:

> From the very inception of the Strategic Hamlet Program it was apparent that many of these (provincial Vietnamese) officials did not fully understand the concept, and were so frightened by the pressures from the President (that is Diem) and his brother that they would employ any measures from forced labour and confiscation to false reporting, to achieve the quantitative goals set. Although these tendencies were at first restrained, the pressures for "reporting" steadily increased, while at the same time the influence of U.S. advisors lessened, as a result of errors and misunderstandings on both sides.[4]

U.S. officials on the scene may have been aware of this tendency, but there is little to suggest they had much control over it. To Richard Holbrooke, who served as advisor for Ba Xuyen Province in the Strategic Hamlet Program in 1963, the reporting system was perverted. Holbrooke was initially unable to get accurate locations of hamlets in his province. When he did, he found that a large number were simply wards of the larger cities in the province. Others were definitely not defended or anywhere near completion: "they'd done nothing more than erect a fence or put a few punji stakes in a moat, which could be easily jumped." What surprised him was that the leadership of the U.S. government was making policy based on false information. The situation in his province was far different from that which was reported. To Holbrooke the program was not at fault; the reporting was.[5]

The extent of false reporting on the strategic hamlets became clear after the coup of November 1963. Roger Hilsman, in To Move a Nation, stated that the statistics on the strategic hamlets were completely false. Instead of the 8,600 strategic hamlets claimed by Diem, the new government could only confirm that 20% of them met the standards. In Long An Province, for example, the Diem regime reported 219 strategic hamlets. After the coup, the new administration could only identify 45 hamlets which met the criteria. Hilsman quoted a Vietnamese general who understood the situation perfectly:

> Your Secretary of Defense loves statistics. We Vietnamese can give him all he wants. If you want them to go up, they will go up. If you want them to go down, they will go down.[6]

OFFICIAL PROGRESS REPORTS

Understandably, official Government of Vietnam reports were extremely positive. On 17 April 1963, Diem said:

> After only one year, the irresistible movement of strategic hamlets had already gone far beyond the original tactical objectives. In constant progression this movement has upset all the subversive maneuvers of the enemies of the nation, and it has, in addition, strongly shaken the foundations of their very organization. At the same time that the general security grows, the foundations of the personalist revolution take root in the country-side bringing the certainty of victory for the just cause.[7]

Thompson, in a similarly enthusiastic mood, reported on the situation in September 1962. He told Diem that very great progress had been made over the last six months.[8] By March 1963, in a subsequent report, Thompson remained generally positive in his assessment, noting that the government had a firm base from which to continue the program. This report did contain some qualifying comments on how the government should proceed. First, the government should maintain the initiative to prevent the Viet Cong from infiltrating back into the areas they had been forced to vacate. Second, by trying to go too fast, and by extending into "red" areas, the government faced the grave risk of overreaching itself and overcommitting the available forces.

Third, the planning of where and when strategic hamlets were to be constructed should be taken away from the provincial level and be linked to an overall strategy. Fourth, and most importantly, the report claimed that no strategic hamlet is ever completely finished. Improvements should be continually taking place in all aspects of hamlet life.[9] In September 1963, in his final official report, Thompson commented that the program had now gone too fast, "with a consequent dispersal of effort and a scattering of hamlets over too wide an area." He noted that the situation was dangerous, but could be resolved by a clear decision on priority areas and the consolidation of the existing hamlets.[10]

During the period 1961 to 1963 there were two major official American reports which covered the situation in South Vietnam. Both reports were used in compiling the assessment provided below. Some preliminary comments are appropriate.

Roger Hilsman had been associated with the United States' role in the strategic hamlet idea from the very beginning, when he had written the "Strategic Concept for Vietnam." As the Director of the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research, he was uniquely qualified to comment on the general situation in South Vietnam and on the progress of the Strategic Hamlet Program. In a Bureau of Intelligence and Research Memorandum, which was a year-end summary for 1962, he suggested that, at best, only the rate

of deterioration of the situation in South Vietnam had been decreased. Even with the strategic hamlets, the Government of Vietnam had only slightly improved its control over the countryside. Hilsman correctly predicted that the Viet Cong might step up its military response in reaction to the growing U.S. and Government of Vietnam counterinsurgency response. He was also correct in assessing that a coup would seriously disrupt government leadership and reverse the momentum of the government's counterinsurgency effort.[11]

Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Maxwell Taylor were much more positive than Hilsman about the situation in South Vietnam echoing, if not setting the agenda for the Department of Defense line. In their report of 2 October 1963, they suggested that by the end of 1965, "It should be possible to withdraw the bulk of U.S. personnel..."[12] Commenting later, General Bruce Palmer was of the opinion that McNamara and Taylor were misled by General Harkins' unsubstantiated assertions of progress on the military front. To Palmer, their report "was so unrealistic as to be almost ludicrous."[13]

If McNamara and Taylor misread the situation concerning the utility of U.S. troops, the remainder of their observations and conclusions must also be treated with caution. McNamara and Taylor remarked very favourably on the role of the U.S. military men and civilians as well as the effectiveness of the American role in economic and civic

action. In addition, they praised the Strategic Hamlet Program. They found the concept sound and generally effective in execution. This assessment does not compare favourably with Thompson's September report. Thompson believed that the program was overextended and that, in some areas, the situation "was serious, though not yet dangerous."[14]

However, the McNamara and Taylor report did include some qualifying comments. It is in these comments that the truth about the strategic hamlets became apparent. In a comment directly related to the speed of implementation of the program, Taylor and McNamara expressed the view that the Strategic Hamlet Program needed to be consolidated, especially in the Delta. This would ensure that those hamlets already constructed could be provided adequate resources. Action was also needed to ensure that future strategic hamlets were not built until they could be protected and civic action programs could be introduced.[15] Elsewhere in the report, McNamara and Taylor observed that the civic action element of the program "necessarily lagged behind the physical completion of hamlets and in insecure areas has made little progress." They further observed that there was evidence to suggest that a hamlet's readiness to defend itself bore a direct relationship to the amount of civic action completed.[16] This final comment is in complete agreement with the views expressed by Thompson, who insisted

that the strategic hamlets needed to provide something worthwhile for the villagers.

Of all the reports of the time, Hilsman's provided the clearest, most realistic, and accurate assessment of the situation and its possible outcomes. Even though Hilsman was involved in government discussions and deliberations up to the National Security Council level, his observations and comments, as well as those of other experts, such as Rufus Phillips, seem to have had little effect on the conduct of the war in South Vietnam, or on the rift between the U.S. Department of State and the U.S. Department of Defense over the war. Arthur M Schlesinger, Jr. provided a very clear example of the differences between the two organizations. He referred to a National Security Council meeting on 10 September 1963 in which President Kennedy received briefs from a Marine officer, General Victor Krulak, and Joseph Mendenhall of the State Department. Both men had recently visited Vietnam to investigate the situation on the President's behalf. On their return they presented the President with vastly different views of the situation. Mendenhall thought that the regime was on the verge of collapse and that South Vietnam was in a desperate state. General Krulak's assessment was that the war was going well and that the regime was loved by the people. After listening politely to the two reports, President Kennedy asked, "Were you two gentlemen in the same country?"[17]

SECURITY MEASURES

Government expectations for security were diverse. The governments of Vietnam and the United States were both concerned with the threat of a ground invasion from the north so they devoted much of their security effort to countering this threat. The insurgency situation also required that the government provide security in the form of protection for the villagers so they could live their lives free of Viet Cong terror, extortion, and intimidation. In the early stages of the insurgency the government had tried to make do with police and paramilitary forces. By 1961 these forces were clearly inadequate, and increasing numbers of regular military forces were required.

The 3 December 1962 Research Memorandum from the Bureau of Intelligence and Research offered a good view of the overall security situation in late 1962. Hilsman's opinion was that the judgment of many Vietnamese and U.S. officials that the tide was "turning" in the struggle against Viet Cong insurgency and subversion was premature. To him the rate of deterioration had at best "decelerated" with increased U.S. assistance and the implementation of a broad counterinsurgency plan by the Government of Vietnam:

> Effective Government of Vietnam control of the countryside has been extended slightly. In some areas where security has improved peasant attitudes towards the government appear also to have improved.[18]

The result was that the Viet Cong were forced to modify their tactics and, to a certain degree, set back their timetable. Viet Cong strength, however, was not substantially weakened, nor did they modify their aim of fighting a war for "national liberation." Hilsman reported that the Viet Cong strength had actually increased and that they still controlled about 20% of the villages and 9% of the rural population. In addition the Viet Cong had varying degrees of influence among an additional 47% of the villages. As the strategic hamlets were an attempt to win the allegiance of the people, the most telling segment of Hilsman's report indicated that Viet Cong control and communications lines to the peasants were not seriously weakened. The guerillas were thus able to maintain good intelligence, initiative, mobility, and striking power. Even though significant gains for the government could hardly be expected this early in the program, the report was less than encouraging.[19]

The October 1963 McNamara-Taylor report gave another view of the security situation after a full year and a half of the Strategic Hamlet Program. The report was positive but, as has already been observed, it may not have been realistic. McNamara and Taylor observed progress at a fairly steady rate, even through a period of political unrest in Saigon. Progress was most clear in the northern two thirds of the country where the Strategic Hamlet Program had "matured effectively" and the freedom of rural movement

had grown steadily. Progress was not as marked in the Delta area, which remained the toughest area and which the authors concluded required top priority. The Government of Vietnam needed to make decisions concerning the use of resources and, most significantly for the Strategic Hamlet Program, the consolidation rather than the further spread of strategic hamlets.[20]

Another view of the overall security situation was provided by comments of the USOM representative, Rufus Phillips at a U.S. National Security Council meeting on 10 September 1963 (the meeting in which Kennedy asked General Krulak and Joseph Mendenhall if they had visited the same country). Phillip's assessment, as reported by Hilsman, was that the war was going well in I, II, and III Corps areas, but it was not going well in the IV Corps area, the Delta. In this area, fifty hamlets had been overrun in the last few weeks and the hamlets were not being protected. Phillips observed that the war was political rather than military. "It was a war for men's minds more than a battle against the Viet Cong, and it was being lost."[21]

One of the main government aims under the Strategic Hamlet Program was to isolate the Viet Cong from the rural population. Table 1, based on government figures which were usually optimistic, indicates that the government efforts were not particularly successful.

TABLE 1
CONTROL OF RURAL POPULATION
(Figures show percentages of villages.)

	Jul 62	Oct 62	Dec 62	Apr 63
Government in effective control	47	49	51	54
Government in ascendancy	29	27	27	27
Neither in control	1	6	5	5
Viet Cong in ascendancy	14	10	9	7
Viet Cong in effective control	9	8	8	7

Adapted from the Pentagon Papers (Gravel Edition).[22]

Although the figures only cover the period to April 1963, they do not indicate a convincing trend towards government control. There was improvement, but hardly enough to declare the Strategic Hamlet Program a success in providing security for the rural population. A Department of State Research Memorandum, dated 22 October 1963, included military indicators for the period up to September 1963. There was actually an unfavourable shift in the military balance during the latter half of 1963. Viet Cong company-sized attacks or larger increased and demonstrated increased daring, planning, and coordination. The number of armed Viet Cong attacks increased while Viet Cong casualties, weapons losses, and defections decreased. It was estimated that the military position of the Government of Vietnam may have been set back to the position it

occupied in April 1963. What was unfortunate was that these trends came at a time of increased political tension because of the Buddhist crisis. Thomas L. Hughes the author of the Research Memorandum, wrote:

> At the same time, even without the Buddhist issue and the attending government crisis, it is possible that the Diem regime would have been unable to maintain the favourable trends of previous periods in the face of the accelerated Viet Cong effort.[23]

Despite government efforts to provide security, the peasant in the hamlet remained exposed to the Viet Cong. The Viet Cong exploited the weaker hamlets by combining their armed attacks with propaganda and increased subversion. In many areas the Viet Cong simply elected to lay low and concentrate on infiltrating the hamlets from within. In some ways this threat to the peasants was greater, as the Viet Cong often acted against those who were supporting the government. The peasant also suffered from the increased effort against the insurgents, and many peasants found themselves the victims of government military activities. Michael V Forrestal of the Department of State, in a Memorandum for the President, was unable to determine how many of the 20,000 "Viet Cong" killed in 1962 were only innocent, or at least persuadable, villagers.[24]

ECONOMIC PROGRAM

Economic aims for the Strategic Hamlet Program were at best vague claims for development through the promotion of rural industries, cooperative institutions and the full

development of local resources. Economic development appeared as very much the poor cousin among a poverty stricken group of relatives. Centralized economic planning was promulgated in the form of a Five Year Plan (mid 1957 to mid 1962). Dennis Duncanson assessed the plan as a "piece of publicity rather than a detailed programme."[25]

Pham Chung observed that the responsible government agencies "had not agreed upon a definite concept concerning the strategic hamlet economic policy."[26] The absence of any real policy is confirmed in the 3 December 1962 Hilsman memorandum to the Secretary of State. In a reference to the economic development program, Hilsman stated that the Government of Vietnam "has not as yet put into effect any concrete measures to carry out its program."[27] This problem was not confined to the early stages of the program. Pham Chung also noted that even after the coup of November 1963, an economic policy remained to be formulated.[28] The lack of clearly defined aims presented considerable difficulties when trying to assess the effectiveness of the program.

In the early 1960s South Vietnam was beset with economic problems. Diem had been attempting economic reform since 1956, but he had inherited an economy in a desperate state. The French had neglected the development of the economic infrastructure of Vietnam, being concerned primarily with resource exploitation. The Geneva accords split the country in two, leaving the south with an economy based on agriculture and largely deficient in skilled

labour, raw materials, and sources of energy, all of which were plentiful in the north. What economic infrastructure existed in South Vietnam had suffered heavily from years of war.

Government efforts at land reform had been largely unsuccessful even though Diem had declared the program completed in 1960. Even though land reform was declared complete, the major problems of unclear titles, transfer of titles, and retention rights remained unsolved.[29] The NLF presented a rival land reform program, especially in the Delta area. The VC depicted the strategic hamlets as a technique for depriving farmers of their land and the Communists offered their own land redistribution program. Their policy was to give the land back to the peasants and thereby engage them in their illegal administrative structure.[30]

If this was not enough, the new country of South Vietnam had faced the substantial problem of assimilating over 800,000 refugees from the north and a population growth rate approaching 3% per year. Even with huge amounts of foreign aid it would have been a herculean task to bring about any substantial improvement, let alone any restructuring of the basic economic situation in the south.

To add to these woes, the country was confronted with a worsening security situation which demanded huge amounts of money and the talents of its ablest administrators. The increased levels of insecurity in the countryside resulted

in large numbers of the rural population moving to the urban areas, which contributed to an already chronic level of unemployment. The worsening security situation also frightened off domestic and foreign investors who were no longer prepared to commit capital. The security situation clearly demonstrated the interdependent nature of the stated aims for the strategic hamlets. If security could not be assured in the countryside, there was little hope for economic development. Investors were not prepared to commit capital in the face of the Communist threat, and the people were unwilling to work in the agricultural projects and industries that might be developed.

In his State of the Nation message to the National Assembly on 1 October 1962, Diem made a number of comments which give some indication on how the economic program was proceeding. He recognized that agriculture was the economic base of South Vietnam and that it had to be given priority in development. He saw that there was a need to raise the living standards of the rural population.[31] This need was brought about by a rise in the cost of living and a trend of a decline in income among the lowest income groups. Hilsman was encouraged by Diem's recognition of the problem, but he observed that unless correct economic measures were taken, Diem's other economic initiatives "will merely widen the income gap which already exists and further alienate the peasants from the Government of Vietnam."[32]

One year later, on 23 October 1963, the McNamara-Taylor report provided a further view of the economic situation. The economic section of their report dealt primarily with business and commercial indicators and the overall state of the economy, which they viewed as satisfactory.[33] However, there are elements of the report that give some indication of the economic situation for the peasants. The projected budget deficit was to be about 6.5 billion piastres (about $91 million), which would mean an increase in the money supply and consequent inflationary pressure. The report indicated that severe restraints were required if inflation was to be kept under control. The significance of inflation and balance of payments difficulties lies in the fact that at the same time there were considerable political difficulties. As a result, investor confidence levels were low and investment decisions were being delayed as investors were concerned about further inflationary pressures. In this type of economic climate there was little or no room for improvement for the peasant.

In the South Vietnamese rural sector there was a limited capacity for sustainable economic growth. The rural sector comprised 80% of the population and was largely a subsistence economy with barter activity being prevalent. Attempts were made to provide funds and training for the peasants to assist them in agricultural and light industrial efforts. These efforts were inadequate and often poorly administered. Many of the programs were subject to

corruption. Often, responsible administrators never set foot in the villages, funds allocated for small community development programs were simply pocketed by local officials, and there were insufficient training cadres who, in many cases, gave orders and directives to the peasants rather than acting as advisors.[34]

Pham Chung also covered additional adverse effects of the strategic hamlets. Large numbers of peasants had to be relocated to the new hamlets. More than 80,000 peasants were required to move in Long An, a Delta province, where the homes were widely scattered. In the highlands more than 150,000 people were regrouped into development centres. Apart from the social effect, the movement had a significant economic impact. As the peasants moved, most of the homes were abandoned or destroyed. The government allocated only 2,000 piastres (about $28) in compensation. For the average peasant this meant a loss of 18,000 piasters on the value of his home, if he was able to get the full amount of compensation.[35] Other adverse effects were the loss of small garden plots which provided food for personal consumption, the need to change farming methods because of a change in location and the difficulty or inability to travel to their land to farm. Many peasants were forced to take work as labourers. Thus, for many peasants, the immediate effect of the strategic hamlets was a reduction in their standard of living, rather than an improvement.

In summary, the economic claims for the Strategic Hamlet Program (the promotion of rural industries, cooperative institutions, and the full development of local resources) were not met. Life for the majority of peasants remained the same, while for others, conditions actually worsened.

SOCIAL REFORM

The strategic hamlets envisaged a new scale of social values, founded on civic values and dedication to the common good. This was a radical departure from Vietnamese values and customs, which for many centuries had been very traditional and conservative and based on both the family and the village. During the French colonial period there had been some changes, but changes in the village and hamlet were minimal.

Under the new social arrangements the old values of wealth, influence, age, or formal education were no longer important. What became important was an individual's contribution to the struggle against Communism and underdevelopment, and his participation in the national reconstruction effort. According to the new concept there would be three class divisions, each of which would receive privileges corresponding to the part played in national salvation. Class I, those in arms against Communism, would receive priority of government benefits. Second priority was to be given to Class II, the elected representatives and administrative and political cadres. Class III, the

peasantry and workers, would receive the least.[36] Changes of this nature are difficult in any society, let alone in a traditional village society which had inherited the Confucian attitudes of China. The task was made doubly difficult as there was no leadership by example. Diem, his family and his associates certainly did not see themselves as members of Class II. By nature a mandarin, Diem was incapable of allowing any meaningful devolution of political power or privilege. Privilege and power remained firmly wedded to the President and those who supported him. The proposed rewards for Class I should be seen as a cynical and barely transparent attempt to ensure recruits for the armed forces.

Much of the legislation of the time was devoted to social reforms. Reform was unpopular with the majority of the population as it tended to bear the ideological and religious stamp of the President and his family. Examples included the Marriage Law and the Morality Law, both of which Madame Nhu, the President's sister-in-law, was very much responsible for. The Marriage Law abolished polygamy, concubinage, and divorce. The Morality Law dealt with fortune-telling and gaming, dancing in public houses, and contraception. About the only success of these laws was in making the President and his family look silly.[37]

It is intriguing to note that none of the official U.S. reports of the time carry any mention of the social revolution proposed by Diem. Was the social revolution,

which was couched in the personalist philosophy, too hard to understand? Or was the whole issue just written off as being of no consequence? American reports referred to tangible projects which could be construed as social activities. However, there was no effort to deal with the real intent of the program, which was, in reality, a grotesque and self-serving experiment in social engineering.

The promises of social reform were just that, promises. In most hamlets the residents remained unable to elect their own officials and representatives. Due to the security situation the officials were appointed by the regime in Saigon ostensibly to ensure that the Viet Cong could not gain control. The villagers were still exploited by the landlords. As for Class I, those who bore arms in the fight against the Communists, it was pure fantasy to say that they received the most from society. The poor pay, lack of support, and inadequate equipment provided to the militia was eloquent testimony to this discrepancy.

Attempts at social reform in the strategic hamlets tended to be more mechanical than anything else. Reports of the time concentrate on the number of schools, wells, market places, and meeting halls built. These and other similar projects were taken as the measure of social reform. They were certainly useful in building civic pride, and as Robert Thompson had recommended, they gave the peasant a reason to fight. But in terms of bringing the peasant closer to the government or bringing about a new social consciousness,

they were of limited utility. Material and finance for social projects that were in theory selected by the peasants were provided through self-help programs. As with all government projects, administration of the self help projects was beset with delays and multiple layers of bureaucracy. Corrupti as rife and, at times, government officials rigged the projects to feature their own programs. Nighswonger detailed an instance in Quang Nam Province in which the information cadre rigged applications for the construction of meeting halls. These had been "requested" in 40 of the initial 60 applications for help. "Most of the structures were never built because the people did not really want the halls."[38]

Despite the grand promises and rhetoric, little changed over the period. Certainly new facilities were provided and some peasants enjoyed new amenities which gave some indication that the government was concerned and responsive to their needs. The question remains as to the sincerity of the government attempts at social reform. Many of the social projects were only introduced at the insistence of USOM officials and were certainly only implemented through the use of U.S. finance and expertise. Diem was under considerable U.S. pressure to implement social and political reforms; so the reforms introduced under the Strategic Hamlet Program were, at best, a limited concession to U.S. pressure.

The new social revolution was in reality a means by which the Government of Vietnam could delay much-needed administrative and agrarian reform.[39] The unintended result was that rather than the guerilla war delaying the much needed reforms, the delay in the reforms fed the guerilla war.

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

President Diem stated that he expected the strategic hamlets would bring about democracy in the rural areas. Serious questions must be asked about his sincerity in expressing this aim.

The constitution of South Vietnam, promulgated in 1956, guaranteed all the basic rights and protections to citizens, with a proviso to each section of the constitution allowing suspension in individual cases at the discretion of the Executive. Provisos and exceptions were very much the case with the formal government apparatus. The President had full Executive powers, but without the checks and balances as in the U.S. system. The "constitution established a dictatorship in law."[40] The situation was dramatically outlined by comments from a letter written to Diem by 18 prominent citizens on 26 April 1960:

> In spite of the fact that the bastard regime created and protected by colonialism has been overthrown and that many of the feudal organizations of factions and parties which oppress the population were destroyed, the people do not know a better life or more freedom under the republican regime which you have created. A constitution has been established in form only; a National Assembly exists whose deliberations always

> fall into line with the government; antidemocratic elections-all those are methods and "comedies" copied from the dictatorial Communist regimes...[41]

Diem justified tight political controls on the basis of the security situation. In 1956 he had used the security argument to suspend elections for village officials in favour of the delegation of appointment powers to district chiefs and to introduce tight controls over the 1960 elections for the National Assembly. Part of the tight control over the country can also be explained by the character of Diem. As has been seen, Diem was an autocratic ruler who had little in common with the vast majority of the South Vietnamese population. Denis Warner accurately described Diem as the "Last Confucian," and in the way of a mandarin, the more he was pressed to liberalize and broaden the government, the more he resisted. To him, the villages were not ready to run their own affairs, especially in the southern areas.[42] Diem felt that the Communists would only take advantage of any democratic liberties. From the very beginning, he suppressed opposition to his government to the extent that no opposition was allowed. In the end, by denying popular participation in government, there were only two alternatives to his rule: the Viet Cong or a coup.

Shaken by the coup attempt of 1960, Diem became even more autocratic in his outlook. By December 1962, he was becoming increasingly impatient with the democratic process. To Diem, democracy was a useful goal, but its methods were

wasteful and dangerous in South Vietnam. The South Vietnamese people would be better off to submit to a collective discipline until they developed a greater national consciousness and a better sense of civic responsibility.[43] The September 1963, McNamara-Taylor report commented that Diem and Nhu undoubtedly thought they were carrying out a social and political revolution for the good of their country. The report also noted that the positive and educational sides of their actions, which were aimed at the countryside, were increasingly matched by negative and repressive measures of control against the urban population.[44] This comment brings to light the irony of Diem's eventual fall from power. The fall was the result of a revolt by the elite urban segment of society rather than the rural masses. Even though the peasants and the hamlets had been identified as the real battleground in the struggle for legitimacy, their allegiance meant little. Events were still dictated by minority groups in the society.

As has been seen, Diem was ill-inclined towards allowing any distribution of political power. This was partly because of his autocratic nature and his concern over the growing insurgency threat. There was another factor. As with many other developing countries of the time, which were looking for ways to introduce democratic institutions, South Vietnam faced a dilemma. It was confronted with two opposing trends: liberalization and centralization.

"Liberalization", while satisfying the peoples thirst for freedom, was believed to be unable to offer a solution to the economic development problem. Many theorists believed that economic development could only be achieved through "centralization" of power and the concentration of resources.[45] Quite realistically, the Government of Vietnam recognized these problems and sought a means of harmonizing the opposing trends. The strategic hamlets were seen as a means of reconciling these two trends while achieving democracy and development.

No real progress was made towards either. Although elections were held in many hamlets, they were not universal. Powers delegated to provincial officials and those at lower levels were generally administrative functions only and did not involve any real decision making or policy formulation. The executive branch retained its stranglehold on government, allowing only surface reforms at the top layer of the administrative structure of the government. Although the government spoke of grassroot reforms and efforts to establish contact with the peasants, little was done to bring this reform about. In the villages and hamlets, the peasants remained at the mercy of the village officials. In most villages and hamlets the officials were simply hand-picked by higher authority from among those known to be loyal to the President and his family. According to Pham Chung:

> Not elected directly by local residents, these officials had little sense of responsibility to them and tended to use their influence and power for illegitimate reasons.[46]

Despite all the grand rhetoric, no real progress was achieved in the political field, so life remained the same for the rural peasant. While there were a large number of political organizations, such as the National Revolutionary Movement, their primary purpose was to ensure control over the peasants rather than to allow the peasant a say in running his life.

COORDINATING THE TOTAL REVOLUTION

As nearly all observers and commentators assessed, many of the difficulties with the Strategic Hamlet Program stemmed from the lack of an overall strategic plan and proper coordination between the military and civilian activities.

As early as December 1962, Roger Hilsman had reported on this aspect of the program. To him, the Government of Vietnam would not be able to consolidate its military successes into permanent political gains without giving more emphasis to the non-military aspects of the counterinsurgency campaign.[47] The same theme is repeated in the February 1963 memorandum for President Kennedy by Michael Forrestal. To Forrestal, the lack of an overall plan meant difficulties in coordinating military and civilian activities. He compared the proportion of "clear and hold" to "hit and withdraw" operations. Forrestal

reported that a number of American military advisors felt that there were not enough clear and hold operations. Hit and withdraw operations were necessary, but they should be subordinated to the systematic expansion of secure areas.[48]

These reports and others clearly outlined the most significant problem of the Strategic Hamlet Program. The four components, security, economic, social, and political were inextricably tied to each other, and proper coordination was required if the program was to work. There was little point in a military operation to clear an area if the Viet Cong were able to reoccupy the area as soon as the government forces left. Similarly, there was little point in strategic hamlet construction teams moving into an area which was insecure. Timing was important if the whole program was to succeed. Military operations were needed to clear an area, and then the military had to remain long enough for the hamlet to be developed to a point where it could defend itself. Just as important as this military capability was the requirement for concurrent political and social development. The villager and hamlet resident needed something to fight for.

VIET CONG RESPONSE

A July 1962 CIA report to the Secretary of Defense provided a partial assessment of the Viet Cong response to the strategic hamlets. Up to this date there had only been a few scattered Viet Cong attacks on strategic hamlets. That the program was "bothering" the Viet Cong was evidenced

by virulent propaganda attacks by Radio Hanoi and NLF outlets. Captured documents and agent reports indicated that the problem of how to deal with the strategic hamlets was one of the main Viet Cong preoccupations.[49]

Douglas Pike, in Viet Cong, gave a further assessment of the difficulties that the Strategic Hamlet Program caused the Viet Cong. He characterized the program as a major crisis for the NLF. It was a crisis because it forced the NLF leaders to flee the villages, and it offered alternative social and political organizations for the villagers. As the Government of Vietnam had predicted, it eliminated the village as a base for guerilla support, and it made the task of re-establishing NLF influence in the village extremely difficult. It was not until mid-1963, when northern influence became more dominant in the NLF, that the Viet Cong became active against the strategic hamlets and began to experience success in regaining and extending their control in the country-side.[50]

The communist writer, Wilfred Burchett, also attested to the difficulties caused to the Viet Cong by the strategic hamlets. Burchett confirmed Pike's assessment that NLF organizers found it difficult to penetrate the hamlets. Burchett also presented the other side of the situation. The strategic hamlets gave the Viet Cong many opportunities which they could exploit. The strategic hamlets were rich soil in which to sow resistance seeds because of the "total

hatred of the inmates towards the Diemist regime and its U.S. backers."[51]

The Viet Cong response to the Strategic Hamlet Program appeared strangely mixed. The hamlets were designed as a direct challenge to the Viet Cong primary strategy of winning the support of the people, and they were proving to be relatively successful. This meant that the Viet Cong found their task of infiltrating and influencing the peasants appreciably more difficult. At the same time the resentment caused by the hamlets provided the Viet Cong with powerful propaganda material to be used against the Government of Vietnam. On balance, the immediate Viet Cong reaction to the program, which seemed to be a promising and very threatening government initiative, appears to have been very slow to come about and lacking in aggression. Direct military attacks against the strategic hamlets were limited. Robert Thompson described the Viet Cong reaction in the first year as being "negligible." Attacks increased from July 1963 onwards, particularly against those that were being hastily created under the accelerated construction program.[52]

Certainly, reconciling the two opposing effects of isolation from the villagers and the resentment created by the program cannot have been easy. The Viet Cong were capable of mounting a strong attack against the program, but it seems that they decided to let the Government of Vietnam do their work for them. The author, Truong Nhu Tang

provided a clue to the direction the Viet Cong and the NLF took. In a reference to "Albert" (Pham Ngoc Thao), he disclosed that "Albert" was both Nhu's principal aide in implementing the Strategic Hamlet Program and a Viet Cong agent. Nhu was anxious to see rapid progress with the hamlets, and "Albert" was more than happy to ensure that construction moved fast. Truong Nhu Tang is of the opinion that "Albert's" real goal was to sow confusion. The implementation of the Strategic Hamlet Program certainly did this and in addition caused a lot of resentment and hostility in the countryside:

> It is certainly a fact that under his (Nhu's) supervision the strategic hamlets created even more hostility among the peasants than had the Agrovilles before them.[53]

North Vietnamese and NLF propaganda concentrated on the injustices and resentment caused by the program. This demonstrates a careful and clever exploitation of the resentment and hostility generated in the villages and hamlets. Strategic hamlets were a constant theme of North Vietnamese propaganda and the volume of broadcasts and comments suggests that the communists were concerned that the program might become a significant factor in the insurgency. North Vietnamese and NLF propaganda emphasized those factors of the Strategic Hamlet Program which were offensive to the peasants in the south. The propaganda stressed suggestions that the strategic hamlets were

disguised concentration camps, that government forces in the south were using chemical warfare, and that foreigners were unduly involved in the war.[54]

SUCCESS: WAS THERE ANY?

By its title, the thesis assumes failure. Certainly the Strategic Hamlet Program failed to survive the tumultuous events of late 1963 as an organized and comprehensive effort at pacification. Government efforts to isolate and protect the rural population were ineffective and the government was unable to win the support of the peasants.

When trying to assess if there were any successful aspects of the Strategic Hamlet Program, it is necessary to draw a distinction between the program and its individual components. Although it was given a new name, the Strategic Hamlet Program ceased to exist as a program, yet many of the individual components of the program were in part successful and were to be continued. There was by no means universal failure. With the general exception of the political element of the strategic hamlets, there was measureable and credible success. In many cases, life for the peasants improved with the construction of wells, meeting halls and schools, and with the availability of fertilizer, rat poison, and seeds. Many villages were more secure, particularly in early 1962, and the villagers were able to live their lives free of Viet Cong terror and intimidation.

What is clear is that the success was inconsistent, inadequate, and unsustainable. The security of the population was the prerequisite for the subsequent success of the strategic hamlets. The Government of Vietnam was neither able to ensure this security nor was it able to achieve anywhere near enough of an improvement in the peasants' conditions to win their support. As the end of 1963 approached and Viet Cong attacks against the hamlets increased, even the moderate successes of 1962 became impossible to sustain.

THE HAMLETS FALL APART

Any optimism associated with the progress of the strategic hamlets quickly dissipated with the events of the last half of 1963. The Viet Cong increased their attacks and were rapidly overrunning many hamlets, especially those which had been pushed ahead in late 1962. At the same time, there was a growing political clash between the Buddhists and the Saigon regime. This clash, while significant in itself, had two other effects. First, it provided a distraction from pacification and other contemporary issues. Second, and more importantly, it led to an increasingly acrimonious clash between the U.S. administration and the Saigon regime. Since the Staley visit of 1961, the U.S. had been pushing for real reform in South Vietnam and tying reform to increased levels of financial aid. After the visit of Defense Secretary McNamara and General Maxwell Taylor, the demands for reform became more strident. Diem's

unwillingness to allow reform caused the U.S to both threaten to reduce or withdraw aid and to actually take steps to increasingly distance itself from Diem.

Frederick Nolting, U.S. Ambassador to South Vietnam from 1961 to 1963, drew the conclusion that the inability of the U.S. administration to accept Diem's style of government resulted in the coup of 1 November 1963. Diem failed to match the standards of democratic government set by the United States and in spite of earlier pledges to refrain from interfering in the internal politics of South Vietnam, U.S. officials "encouraged dissident generals to revolt."[55] According to Stanley Karnow, President Kennedy gave the new Ambassador, Henry Cabot Lodge, the complete discretion to suspend U.S. aid to Vietnam. In a situation where the Diem regime was almost entirely dependent on U.S. financial support, this gave Lodge the mandate to manage U.S. policy in Vietnam, "and the policy as Lodge defined it, was to topple the Diem regime."[56]

With the death of Diem and his brother Nhu, the Strategic Hamlet Program quickly fell apart. Two reasons stand out. First, after the coup the entire structure of Diem's regime was rejected, and the strategic hamlets were a victim of this rejection.[57] Second, without Nhu, who for all his faults was certainly an enthusiastic and unifying figurehead for the strategic hamlets, there was no leadership to keep the program going.

After the coup of 1 November 1963, the military junta of General Duong Van Minh abandoned many aspects of the Strategic Hamlet Program and quickly changed the name to New Life Hamlets.[58] It is important to note that only the program and its associations with Diem and his political ideas were abandoned. A great many of the ideas associated with the strategic hamlets were retained. Pike confirmed this by writing that the New Life Hamlets (which he called villages) were a continuation of the original program after Diem, but with a new name.[59] To General Minh, the previous regime had two objectives in creating the strategic hamlets. The first objective was to spread the doctrine of communal personalism. The second was to give a front to a war without a front. General Minh rejected the first objective, but spoke of retaining the second and of improving matters. To accentuate the link between the strategic hamlets and the new life villages, General Minh noted that he was impressed with the experiences of Malaya's fortified villages.[60]

The need for pacification and development remained, and in reality the government's approach to the problem changed very little. Unfortunately, in the interim period between the fall of Diem and the activation of the New Life Hamlets, the impetus was lost. The successor regime had no firm policy and were too slow to make the necessary decisions to ensure the continuation of the Strategic Hamlet Program. The Viet Cong were quick to capitalize on this uncertainty, and as a result, the fledgling New Life Hamlets

were themselves doomed to failure. The New Life Hamlets lasted from 1964 until 1966, when they were replaced by the Revolutionary Development Program. The continuation of the basic concept of pacification was a recognition of the importance of the concept as well as the need to protect the peasants and to try and win their support.

ENDNOTES

[1]The lack of an adequate means of evaluation and assessment was recognized. The adoption of the Hamlet Evaluation Scheme (HES), a computer assisted management information system became a major feature of the Civil Operations Rural Development Support (CORDS) when it was implemented in 1967. In a study by Bole and Kobata for the Naval War College, titled, An Evaluation of the Measurements of the Hamlet Evaluation System, the authors conclude that on balance the measurement of HES pacification indicators was quite satisfactory for the pacification program in Vietnam and they recommend that the HES be retained for further development.

[2]Robert Thompson, Defeating Communist Insurgency (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1966), 141.

[3]William A. Nighswonger, "Rural Pacification in Vietnam: 1962-1965" (Ph.D. diss., The American University, 1966), 278.

[4]Milton E. Osborne, Strategic Hamlets in South Vietnam, A Survey and a Comparison Department of Asian Studies, Data Paper: Number 55 (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1965), 35.

[5]Kim Willenson, The Bad War (New York: New American Library, 1987), 108.

[6]Roger Hilsman, To Move A Nation (Garden City: Doubleday and Company, 1967), 523.

[7]Osborne, Strategic Hamlets in South Vietnam, A Survey and a Comparison, 32

[8]Thompson, Defeating Communist Insurgency, 130.

[9]Ibid, 133-135.

[10]Ibid, 139.

[11]Research Memorandum, RFE-59, "The Situation and Short Term Prospects in South Vietnam," Department of State, Bureau of Intelligence and Research, 3 December 1962, by Roger Hilsman, in the Senator Gravel Edition, The Pentagon Papers, Volume II (Boston: Beacon P ess, 1971), 690.

[12]Memorandum for the President, "Report of McNamara-Taylor Mission to South Vietnam," 2 October 1963, in Gravel, Pentagon Papers, 752.

[13]Bruce Palmer Jr., The 25-Year War (Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1984), 12.

[14]Thompson, Defeating Communist Insurgency, 138.

[15]"Report of McNamara-Taylor Mission," in Gravel, Pentagon Papers, 752

[16]Ibid, 756.

[17]Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., A Thousand Days (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1965), 993.

[18]Research Memorandum, "Situation and Short-Term Prospects in South Vietnam," in Gravel, Pentagon Papers, 690.

[19]Ibid.

[20]"Report of McNamara-Taylor Mission," in Gravel, Pentagon Papers, 752

[21]Hilsman, To Move a Nation, 505.

[22]Gravel, Pentagon Papers, 157.

[23]Research Memorandum, RFE-90, "Statistics on the War effort in South Vietnam Show Unfavourable Trends," Department of State, Bureau of Intelligence and Research, 22 October 1963, by Thomas L. Hughes, in Gravel, Pentagon Papers, 770.

[24]Memorandum for the President, February 1963, by Michael V. Forrestal, in Gravel, Pentagon Papers, 718.

[25]Dennis J. Duncanson, Government and Revolution in Vietnam (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 240.

[26]Pham Chung, Analysis of the Long-Range Military, Economic, Political and Social Effects of the Strategic Hamlet Program in Vietnam (Washington, D.C.: Advanced Research Projects Agency, Office of the Secretary for Defense, 1964), 133.

[27]Research Memorandum, "Situation and Short Term Prospects in South Vietnam," in Gravel, Pentagon Papers, 711.

[28]Pham Chung, Analysis of the Long-Range Military, Economic, Political and Social Effects of the Strategic Hamlet Program in Vietnam, 134.

[29]Pike, Viet Cong (Cambridge: The M.I.T. Press, 1966), 62-63.

[30]Ibid, 276-278.

[31]Research Memorandum, "Situation and Short-Term Prospects in South Vietnam," in Gravel, Pentagon Papers, 710.

[32]Ibid, 711.

[33]"Report of McNamara-Taylor Mission," in Gravel, Pentagon Papers, 751.

[34]Pham Chung, Analysis of the Long-Range Military, Economic, Political and Social Effects of the Strategic Hamlet Program in Vietnam, 203.

[35]Ibid, 204.

[36]Ibid, 241.

[37]Duncanson, Government and Revolution in Vietnam, 248.

[38]Nighswonger, "Rural Pacification in Vietnam: 1962-1965", 218.

[39]Duncanson, Government and Revolution in Vietnam, 343.

[40]Ibid, 228.

[41]Bernard B. Fall, The Two Vietnams (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1971), 436.

[42]Denis Warner, The Last Confucian (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1963), 90.

[43]Hilsman, To Move a Nation, 708.

[44]"Report of McNamara-Taylor Mission," in Gravel, Pentagon Papers, 759.

[45]Pham Chung, Analysis of the Long-Range Military, Economic, Political and Social Effects of the Strategic Hamlet Program in Vietnam, 231.

[46]Ibid, 253

[47]Research Memorandum, "Situation and Short Term Prospects in South Vietnam," in Gravel, Pentagon Papers, 691.

[48]Memorandum for the President, by Michael V. Forrestal, in Gravel, Pentagon Papers, 721.

[49]Memorandum for the Secretary for Defense, "Chief of Saigon Station Report," Office of the Director, Central Intelligence Agency, 13 July 1962, in Gravel, Pentagon Papers, 686.

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[51]Wilfred G. Burchett, Vietnam Inside Story of the Guerilla War (New York: International Publishers, 1965), 190.

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[56]Stanley Karnow, Vietnam A History (New York: The Viking Press, 1983), 290.

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CHAPTER 6

WHY THE STRATEGIC HAMLET PROGRAM FAILED

The assassination of President Diem and his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu did not bring about the sudden end of the Strategic Hamlet Program. The end of the program had been coming for some time. By mid 1963, attacks had been increasing against the hamlets, especially in the populous Mekong Delta area, and many previously secure hamlets had been lost to the Viet Cong. Now with the death of the President and his brother, and the haste of the new regime to disassociate itself from anything to do with Diem's regime, the Strategic Hamlet Program simply fell apart.

This study of the Strategic Hamlet Program while identifying some limited success, has catalogued the overall failure of the program to bring about pacification in South Vietnam over the period 1961 to 1963.

REASONS FOR FAILURE

Inadequate Planning and Coordination. The strategic hamlets were inadequately planned and poorly coordinated. This was due to the desire to complete the program quickly and to the absence of a sufficient number of administrators with the knowledge and experience to implement a program of

this magnitude. Other reasons for poor planning were the absence of an overall strategy and the bureaucratic structure that was established to implement the hamlets.

To Robert Thompson, the Vietnamese did not understand the need to ensure that all the components of the Strategic Hamlet Program came together in a coordinated manner. They "seemed unable to understand" that nothing would be accomplished "unless the other necessary measures were taken to achieve the three objectives; of protection, of uniting and involving the people, and of development with the ultimate aim of isolating the guerilla units from the population."[1] Thompson also cited examples of the construction of hamlets which indicated a lack of coordination. In these instances the hamlets and their defences were constructed, but "no men from the hamlet have been trained or armed to defend it."[2] According to Thompson, defences and training as well as an alarm and communications system needed to be provided simultaneously. In other examples, militia volunteers received training but the weapons they had been promised "came late or were too few or never arrived at all."[3]

Inadequate Resources. At the start of the Strategic Hamlet Program, South Vietnam lacked the necessary financial and material resources to implement and support the strategic hamlets. Financial assistance was eventually provided by many countries, such as West Germany and Australia, but the majority of assistance was provided by

the United States through the United States Operations Mission in Saigon.[4] However, these funds were not available during the initial stages of the program. Significant levels of support did not become available until American Military Assistance Program and Agency for International Development Funds were provided in September 1962.[5] This was over a year after the South Vietnamese began constructing the first hamlets in July 1961.[6] William Nighswonger termed the intervening period, during which strategic hamlets were planned and executed without U.S. assistance, as the "self-sufficiency" period. What is significant is that by October 1962, Diem claimed that over 7 million people were housed in strategic hamlets, completed or under construction.[7] Most of these hamlets were built without significant external financial assistance and, as a result, suffered from a lack of the necessary resources to ensure proper construction and maintenance.

Even after external assistance became available, overall resources levels remained inadequate. Inadequacies were further accentuated at the district and provincial level by distribution difficulties and inequities in the allocation of resources. These difficulties clearly indicated the problems of planning the program at the national level and ensuring that the individual provincial programs were adequately resourced.

Unrealistic Timetable. As if the problems of inadequate resources and poor planning and coordination were not enough, the implementation of the strategic hamlets was further complicated by the pace of construction demanded from Saigon. Faced with an increasing threat from the Viet Cong, Diem's government made a deliberate decision to complete the Strategic Hamlet Program at an accelerated pace. The decision meant that customs and traditions that had evolved over centuries to regulate the way of life in the countryside were to be modified in just two years. In view of the immensity of the task, the lack of available resources and the scarcity of trained competent personnel, this decision was totally unrealistic. Undaunted, the government went into mass production, concerned primarily with quantity, rather than location or quality. The rate of construction, however, was itself viewed as a measure of success, and this resulted in increasingly insistent demands for more and more hamlets, which were less and less secure.

In this environment, inexperienced officials, who often owed their position and livelihood to their loyalty to the regime in Saigon, reacted to support the government demands and threw together so called strategic hamlets. The hamlets were inadequately resourced and as a result the inhabitants were not properly supplied with food, shelter, and protection. Resources to implement the more expensive economic reforms were even less available as the scheme progressed into 1962.

As with the Agrovilles, many peasants were unhappy with the forced changes. From this stemmed the bitter resentment and frustration of the peasants, and the Viet Cong campaign to refer to the hamlets as "concentration camps." Among the most unhappy peasants were the 180,000 montagnards who were moved out of the highland regions into settlement centres in 1962. A great number of these people returned to their mountain homes disenchanted and bitter. They had simply not received the food, tools, housing and other items that the government had promised them.[8]

Siting and Construction. The strategic hamlets were widely distributed throughout South Vietnam and their construction was not linked to an overall national strategy. This meant that hamlets were not established in an area and then expanded out as government control was consolidated. This approach went directly against the advice of Thompson who had advised all along that the government needed to follow something like the "oil spot" approach which had been so successful in Malaya. Instead of this or some other deliberate strategy, many of the hamlets were simply placed where there was some local interest, or where local officials thought appropriate. In his March 1963 report to Diem, Thompson remarked that it was now time to take planning responsibilities away from the provincial level and establish it at the Tactical Zone or Corps level. In this way, the planned advance of strategic hamlets could be linked to an overall strategy.[9] While perhaps providing a

partial solution, Thompson's suggestion still did not demand the establishment of a central nationwide strategy.

Even at the provincial level, the hamlets were not linked to an overall district or province security plan, which meant that they were often isolated and easy targets for Viet Cong attacks. Instead of being sited for tactical reasons, fences and ditches "followed administrative boundaries and the accidents of field ownership.[10] Large gaps were left between hamlets, effectively isolating them and allowing the Viet Cong to attack isolated individual hamlets rather than a coordinated defensive system.

Inadequate Evaluation. The absence of adequate criteria by which to judge if a strategic hamlet was completed and effective made it almost impossible to obtain an accurate picture of the progress of the scheme. This problem was accentuated by inaccurate and at times completely falsified information from the field. Early reports of completion, often grossly exaggerated, encouraged the government to proceed with the program. As a result, instead of being used to complete the initial hamlets, available resources were further dispersed among the new hamlets being constructed because of the "success" of the program. The government was left without a clear picture of the progress of the scheme and it's effect on the overall pacification campaign. This meant that the original plans were pursued almost unchanged with no modification in light

of observed success or failure. All reports indicated success, so the program was pressed ahead.

Local Officials. Officials at all levels were poorly trained and often did not understand the philosophy behind the Strategic Hamlet Program. This was particularly evident at the local level, where many officials were simply political appointees with no administrative or management skills. In most cases they owed their jobs to their personal and political connections, and retained their positions not so much by performance, but by supporting the government and providing "correct answers."

While there were some concerned and competent officials, such as the province chief responsible for "Operation Sea Swallow," most were overwhelmed by the magnitude of the task and were more interested in what opportunities the program offered them, rather than how they could help the peasants. As these officials, many of whom were military officers, went about the task of constructing the strategic hamlets, they were inclined to concentrate on the security aspects of the program. To them, as for many higher level officials, success meant the regroupment of large numbers of peasants behind bamboo and barbed wire fences. They had very little idea about the real intentions behind the plans for economic advancement and social and political development.

While the government had planned to compensate the peasants, the amount allocated was inadequate, and due to

endemic corruption among officials at all levels, payment was often not at the set levels or not received at all. Corruption became a significant problem and the source of much peasant frustration and discontent. Not even the extensive U.S. effort to control and monitor the flow of funds and resources down to very low levels was able to provide an effective counter to the problem of corruption.

Peasant Reaction. Peasants were forced to make heavy contributions to the construction of the strategic hamlets. For many this was an inconvenience; for those who were forcibly removed from their land with the consequent loss of their homes and in many cases their fields and vegetable plots it was a heavy burden. Peasants also lost time and valuable resources by having to contribute to communal projects, often in villages other than their own. They seldom received compensation for this, and it became a cause of considerable discontent. In some instances peasants were forced to make cash payments to support the hamlets.[11] To subsistence farmers in a largely barter economy this payment was extremely difficult.

Peasants generally reacted poorly to the Strategic Hamlet Program. Many peasants were forced to move to new and incomplete hamlets with little psychological preparation or explanation as to the purpose of the program. When they arrived at the new hamlets most gained very little, many lost a great deal. As with the Agrovilles, many lost their land and livelihood. They also resented

being moved from their ancestral land to which they had a deep emotional attachment. The loss that they seemed to resented the most, was the loss of freedom. As a result of government efforts to control movement, peasants were required to surrender their identity cards when they left the hamlet to work in the field. The card was returned when they came back from the fields. As identity cards were required for movement outside of the hamlet and village area, this requirement effectively meant that the peasant could only travel from their home to the fields.

Certainly, in some areas the strategic hamlets brought a sense of pride and identity which meant that the peasants fought valiantly for their hamlet. It also meant that the peasants supported the government providing it with information and assistance in the fight against the Viet Cong. In other areas where the peasants were less inclined towards the government, many hamlets were overwhelmed by Viet Cong attacks. In the areas where allegiance to the government was least, the residents either out of sympathy for the Communists or apathy for the government simply handed the village, along with its officials, over to the Viet Cong.[12]

To the poor unwitting peasant things continued much as they had under the prior efforts at pacification. Although the strategic hamlets were pursued more vigorously and on a much larger scale, the peasants as always gained the least and suffered the most. Many merely wanted to be

left alone to live their traditional life. Any interference, whether from the government or the Viet Cong was likely to alienate them. The government seemed to win the battle of alienating the peasant. The peasants were more likely to be driven from supporting the government as the promised reforms did not materialize and conditions did not improve. Instead of seeing economic, social, and political reforms they became part of a program that was more military than anything else. The goals of the program were expressed in security terms rather than in nation building terms. In the main those who implemented the program were members of the armed forces. The government became increasingly involved in almost every aspect of the peasant's life. As the program progressed and the government was not able to deliver on the promises it had made, it's presence was at very least resented. It was often rejected out of hand as hamlets and villages turned to the Viet Cong. In this environment the Viet Cong were quick to capitalize and quickly and effectively extended their control and influence.

President Diem, A Nationalist and a Mandarin. Part of Diem's attraction to his American supporters was that he was intensely nationalistic and determined that South Vietnam would survive as an independent non-Communist state. As President Kennedy sought the best place to make a commitment against communism in Southeast Asia, these nationalist sentiments were to be one of the deciding factors in

choosing South Vietnam as the place to stand and fight. Thus, beginning with the May 1961 visit of Vice President Johnson, the two nations became increasingly allied in an intensified endeavour against Communism. It was not to be an easy alliance. In part this was due to the nationalist sentiments of Diem, the very sentiments that had attracted the Americans to him in the first place. Diem was wary of American influence, believing that it would jeopardize his nationalist reputation, and as a result he firmly resisted the introduction of American troops.[13] He was also reluctan to accept U.S. advice and suggestions for reform, even when the latter became conditions for U.S. assistance. Faced with no real alternative to Diem at this stage, the Americans were forced to acquiesce. This further accentuated the differences between the two states as the Americans "keenly r sented being the puppet of their puppet."[14]

As well as being unwilling to accept U.S. advice, Diem was also unwilling or unable to accept advice or criticism from his own people. Ruling very much as a Mandarin, he was isolated from his people, suspicious of all around him, and unable to delegate authority. As the threat to his government grew, these attributes were accentuated and he became more and more autocratic. He was convinced that the path he had chosen was the correct one, and he would entertain no criticism. He directed government through a tight group of officials, mostly Catholics, who

were unrepresentative of the majority of the population of South Vietnam. He relied heavily on his family, especially his brother, Nhu, who Hilsman saw as "an influence leading to disaster." Hilsman added that Nhu's suspiciousness and apocalyptic view of himself and his family "hinted of madness."[15] Diem had an excessively narrow view of power and was unwilling to share it with any other element in society. He seized the opportunity offered by the strategic hamlets to extend his power and influence throughout the countryside. As the Strategic Hamlet Program was implemented Diem concentrated on reinforcing his power base rather than realizing the opportunities for economic, social, and political reform.

A Lack of Unity of Effort. There were numerous views of what the strategic hamlets were meant to achieve. Most views were clearly enunciated, others were kept subordinate and pursued surreptitiously. Over the life of the strategic hamlets the differing views provided a source of friction and a factor that effectively precluded unity of effort among the various parties.

To Diem, the program was primarily a means of extending government control in the countryside. By grouping the peasants into more easily controllable and defendable areas and thus separating them from the Viet Cong, the government saw that it could solve the security problem and allow economic, social, and political development. Regrouping also presented Diem with the

opportunity of extending political power in the hamlets by organizations such as the Revolutionary Youth. By references to the concepts of personalism and self-sufficiency, Diem and Nhu also made it very clear that moral force and the revolution within the people were an important part of the Strategic Hamlet Program. In reality, personalism, which was in part designed as a counter ideology to Communism, was an expression that there were inadequate resources to support the strategic hamlets. The government expected much from the peasants and was not inclined to help to any great extent.

To some United States officials, the Strategic Hamlet Program was an opportunity to provide security to South Vietnam and to pacify the country by bringing about realistic and long overdue social, economic, and political reforms. Among American representatives in South Vietnam this was not a universal view. The military tended to concentrate on the conventional threat from the north, viewing the efforts to provide reform at the village and hamlet level as a sideshow and part of another less important war. In contrast the U.S. State Department and many civilians within the Embassy were enthusiastic about instituting reforms to win the allegiance of the people. To this end they made ever increasing financial and material commitments to the pacification program.

These opposing views were never adequately reconciled and the American military and civilian organizations at no

stage reached agreement on the true nature of the war or how it was to be won. The resolution of these opposing views was complicated by the multiple organizations established to implement the program. At no time was there ever any proper coordination and planning between the different agencies. These problems were to seriously dilute the United States effort to assist the Government of South Vietnam and meant that there was no unity of effort in the overall U.S. effort to assist South Vietnam.

Lack of Commitment. The Strategic Hamlet Program was framed in grand rhetoric especially from the government in Saigon. Much was made of the total nature of the "revolution" to achieve improvements through a movement of "solidarity and self-sufficiency." Personalism was introduced as a revolution that "sanctioned social discipline and political constraint in the name of a nobler liberty."[16] Government actions did not live up to the rhetoric. Indeed, both the personalist philosophy and the calls for self-sufficiency seemed to accentuate the gap between the government and the peasants and confirm the insensitivity of the Saigon regime to the situation in the countryside. If the peasants wanted something done, they would have to do it for themselves. To the peasants the government demanded much and offered little in return.

Inappropriate Administrative Structure. Even though the Strategic Hamlet Program became a predominantly military program, it required the coordination of nearly all elements

of the South Vietnamese government as well as many of the agencies of the United States represented in the country. This was not an easy task, and the immense complexities it created taxed the administrative and resource capabilities of South Vietnam. The civil service was poorly educated and most of its senior-level officers were those who had served the French colonial regime, who had "no interest in the countryside or understanding of the peasants."[17]

Both the Government of Vietnam and the Government of the United States established high level administrative and coordinative bodies at the national level. These bodies were of little utility. The Vietnamese Interministerial Committee was largely a figurehead organization established to provide some credibility for the decisions of Nhu. Within the U.S. Country Team there was little coordination between the various agencies that accepted or assumed responsibilities for various aspects of the program. Cooperation and coordination between the respective bodies at this level and all the way down to provincial level was marked by suspicions and differing views on the shape of the program. A prime example of this was the American decision to administer economic assistance at the provincial level in order to avoid the bureaucracy and corruption at the national level.

Viet Cong Reaction. The Viet Cong reaction was strangely mixed. At first their reaction was negligible and it was not until July 1963 that the Viet Cong began to take

concerted military actions against the hamlets. Prior to this they seem to have experienced difficulty in determining the extent of the threat from the strategic hamlets and the appropriate reaction necessary to neutralize the government initiative. Thus in the early stages Viet Cong actions could not be considered as a significant threat to the strategic hamlets. Even into 1963 extensive military activity was not necessary to regain influence and control in the hamlets. Many of the hamlets simply turned to the Viet Cong in frustration and resentment as a result of government actions. The tardiness of violent Viet Cong reaction may have been a deliberate tactic in order to allow the resentment generated by the strategic hamlets to do their work for them. This tactic is reinforced by the role of the Viet Cong agent "Albert" Pham Ngoc Tho, who as Nhu's principal aide, was happy to push the rate of construction ahead at a fast pace. On balance, the Viet Cong response does not appear to have been a decisive factor in the failure of the Strategic Hamlet Program. Their actions were certainly a contributing factor, but there were many more important factors, all of which were under the control of the Government of Vietnam and its allies.

United States Impatience and Intolerance. From the very beginning of American involvement, there were fundamental differences in attitudes and approaches between the South Vietnamese and Americans. The Americans were impatient and anxious to get on with the job. To many

Americans, money, manpower, and firepower were all that were needed to solve the problems of South Vietnam. The Vietnamese were inclined to take a longer term view and were not anxious to take advice. The Vietnamese regarded their nation as older and more sophisticated than the United States, and "looked on the Americans as impatient, naive and childlike, lacking all sense of form or history."[18]

Vice President Johnson echoed the view of many Americans who regarded South Vietnam as "a 'young and unsophisticated' nation, populated by affable little men, unaccustomed to the modern world, who, if sufficiently bucked up by instruction and encouragement, might amount to something."[19]

In times of crisis, these differences were accentuated. As the security situation worsened and the Buddhist crisis grew, tensions between the two nations increased, and eventually a gaping chasm was opened. Frederick Nolting, U.S. Ambassador to South Vietnam suggested that U.S. actions in late 1963 were precipitated by a fear that the U.S. long-term effort to sustain South Vietnam would be negated by the inability of the Diem government to cope with the Buddhist crisis.[20] These fears and a general intolerance of Diem's style of government (American advisers had been demanding reform for many years) precipitated the U.S. support for the coup in November 1963. Nolting's assessment was that to America's ultimate sorrow and defeat in Vietnam, the United States, "ran out of

patience and diplomacy in 1963."[21] The U.S. threat to withdraw aid in late 1963 and complicity in the coup were major factors in sealing the fate of the Strategic Hamlet Program.

CONCLUSION

In the chaos and confusion that followed the coup in November 1963, there was little time for the Strategic Hamlet Program. Officials at all levels of government, were unsure of how to proceed. Those who replaced President Diem had no prepared policy and took too long to make decisions on the future of the strategic hamlets. Most provincial and local officials were replaced and over the next few months there were frequent and repeated changes to these appointments.[22] A paralysis of policy and action continued as governments changed throughout 1964. In this environment, both government officials and the peasants were reluctant to commit themselves to a program associated with the discredited Diem regime and a program that was clearly falling apart. The Viet Cong efficiently filled the void left by the strategic hamlets. They filled it so efficiently, that by the end of 1964, Thompson assessed that the government was losing control in the countryside, and "the villages were beginning 'to encircle the towns'."[23]

The Strategic Hamlet Program failed for a great many reasons. Primary among these were inadequate planning and coordination, inadequate resources, a totally unrealistic

timetable, problems with siting and construction, and inadequate and false evaluation. Other reasons for the failure of the program were the narrow and selfish view of Diem and Nhu of what they wanted to achieve, highlighted by a lack of commitment to the program, an inappropriate and complicated administrative structure that had little coordinative power, and United States impatience and intolerance.

Above all of these reasons the South Vietnamese peasants who had been identified as the focus of the Strategic Hamlet Program, resented and largely rejected the program because of a general perception that there was little in it for them. This feeling was accentuated by corrupt and uncaring government officials more interested in themselves than the people in the countryside.

Despite this example of failure a properly resourced and coordinated pacification campaign remains a viable response to an insurgency situation. A program such as the Strategic Hamlet Program, designed to achieve security, as well as economic, social, and political reform remains a viable component of a pacification program. The Strategic Hamlet Program in South Vietnam was an attempt at such a program. However, because of problems in implementation and design the program was not able to realize its full potential and subsequently failed.

ENDNOTES

[1]Robert Thompson, Defeating Communist Insurgency (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1966), 141.

[2]Ibid, 132.

[3]Douglas S. Blaufarb, The Counterinsurgency Era (New York: The Free Press, 1977), 123.

[4]Pham Chung, Analysis of the Long-Range Military, Economic, Political and Social effects of the Strategic Hamlet Program in Vietnam (Washington, D.C : Advanced Research Projects Agency, Office of the Secretary for Defense, 1964), 28.

[5]William A. Nighswonger, "Rural Pacification in Vietnam, 1962-1965" (Ph.D. diss., The American University, 1966), 83.

[6]Ibid, 72.

[7]Milton E. Osborne, Strategic Hamlets in South Vietnam: A Survey and a Comparison Department of Asian Studies, Data Paper Number 55, (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1965), 33.

[8]Pham Chung, Analysis of the Long-Range Military, Economic, Political and Social effects of the Strategic Hamlet Program in Vietnam, 120.

[9]Thompson, Defeating Communist Insurgency, 135.

[10]Dennis J. Duncanson, Government and Revolution in Vietnam (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 325.

[11]Pham Chung, Analysis of the Long-Range Military, Economic, Political and Social effects of the Strategic Hamlet Program in Vietnam, 122.

[12]Ibid, 114.

[13]George C. Herring, "Peoples Quite Apart. Americans, South Vietnamese, and the War in Vietnam." Diplomatic History Volume 14, Number 1, (Winter 1990): 2.

[14]Ibid, 2.

[15]Roger Hilsman, To Move a Nation (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1967), 461.

[16]Duncanson, Government and Revolution in Vietnam, 216-217.

[17]Douglas S. Blaufarb, The Counterinsurgency Era (New York: The Free Press, 1977), 124.

[18]Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., A Thousand Days (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1965), 542.

[19]Ibid.

[20]Frederick Nolting, From Trust to Tragedy (New York: Praeger, 1988), 139.

[21]Ibid, 141.

[22]Thompson, Defeating Communist Insurgency, 139.

[23]Ibid, 140.

POSTSCRIPT

One outstanding question remains. The question relates to the ability of the United States to act as a constructive and reliable partner in assisting a country faced with an insurgency. A country seeking support should be concerned that it receives consistent and reliable support, generally free of demands for social and administrative reform. In South Vietnam, over the period of this study, the United States was unable to meet these requirements. Support was neither consistent nor was it properly related to the true nature of the problem. Instead of being aimed at the root causes of the insurgency, the aid effort was seriously diluted by a focus on the threat of a conventional invasion from the north. In 1963 the threats to withdraw support indicated the unreliable nature of the United States as a country providing support. The United States was unable to commit itself to a long term view of the problem even though it was recognized that, as in Malaya, the problems of insurgency could not be solved overnight.

The demands for social and political reforms placed on President Diem demonstrated the intolerance of the United States for a political system other than one modelled on its

own. Had the United States been able to accept Diem's rule as a less than "perfect" government and had it committed itself to the long term support of his government and his policies, especially pacification, events may have proceeded differently. Certainly the "Americanization" of the war from 1964 proved a less than satisfactory alternate solution to the problems of South Vietnam.

While U.S. efforts in South Vietnam in support of the strategic hamlets were constructive and contributed to the implementation of the program, U.S. actions also played a role in the demise of the program. The question of the ability of the U.S. to operate in this environment is important for both the country requesting assistance and for the United States as it attempts to shape its security environment into the 21st century. While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to make judgments on this question, it is a subject worthy of further study.

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