Propaganda Analysis:

Communist Reaction to the End of the Diem Government

USIS, Saigon, Vietnam

November 20, 1963
COMMUNIST REACTION TO THE OVERTHROW OF THE DIEM GOVERNMENT.

INTRODUCTION.

Beginning last July, when the possibility of a coup d'état in Vietnam became both real and likely, the communist propaganda organs in Peking, Hanoi, the National Front clandestine station as well as the NLF itself, in its social movement and mass media propaganda in South Vietnam, launched what might be called a preemptive attack on the idea that a change of government would have any meaning or validity.

This effort by its very nature was contradictory and self-defeating. Since the basic tenet of the communists in Vietnam has been that there must be a change in the South Vietnamese government -- indeed, that is what the war is all about -- to report that a change of some unknown character is in the making and per se this is bad, is to undercut the long standing and major communist propaganda theme that all of Vietnam's troubles are due to the Diem government and if only it is can be removed the road to utopia lies straight ahead.

The attack on a new government which did not yet exist presented the communists with several difficulties, chief of which was the fact they didn't know whom they were attacking. However, with an audacity that was monumental, the communist propagandists pursued the theme through the months of August, September and October, hammering away at the idea that Diem, who is bad, is going to be removed and that is not good, however remember that Diem is bad.

In October the radio output -- especially by Peking (apparently more sensitive than either Hanoi or the NLF to the
implications of a change of government) -- became increasingly strident and even hysterical. This hysteria is well understood. A change of government, as the Chinese communists well recognized, presents communist propaganda makers (and perhaps communist policy makers) with the gravest crisis they have faced since the Vietnamese insurgency movement resumed in mid-1960.

This paper is an effort to assess the communist reaction to the overthrow of the Diem government, November 1-2, 1963, and is based on propaganda output by the National Liberation Front, its clandestine radio station broadcasting in South Vietnam, and to some extent the propaganda output by the DRV and Communist China.

The communist propagandists' handling of events in Vietnam since November first can be divided into two categories. First, there has been an effort to manipulate and distort news reports on actual happenings in Saigon in such a way as to discredit the new government and everyone, especially Americans, associated with it. Secondly, there has been an effort to adapt the themes and appeals which have served so well in the past to the new situation.

Communist Interpretation of Coup Events.

As is generally the case with communist propaganda output following some decisive event, initial treatment of events in Saigon was objective and factual, if somewhat confusing. Apparently the first report by Radio Hanoi on the coup came at 1607 GMT November 1, an announcement quoting as its source the Voice of America. The major events of the next 36 hours were
reported more or less accurately: the capture of Gia Long palace, the various accounts of the death of Ngo Dinh Diem and Ngo Dinh Nhu, the U.S. National Security Council meeting in Washington, reports on the movement of the U.S. Seventh Fleet, the flight of Ngo Dinh Can and Ngo Trong Hieu.

The end of the "objective" period came with the popular, pro-army demonstrations by the people of Saigon and elsewhere which were characterized by the communists as being violently anti-American in nature. This began Saturday afternoon, November 2, and with that, it was clear, the communist propaganda policies had been fixed.

From the start certain themes were emphasized, and appeared over and over in the communist output. Five appeared to be stressed more than others.

1. American involvement. The overriding characteristic of communist output addressed directly to the fact of the change of government was a virulent attack on the United States and the "putsch that it has created." In a report on a Saigon MAC-V military briefing Peking reported: "A spokesman... openly announced that the United States would tighten its direct control over the South Vietnam puppet army. He also said that American advisors now hope for a more direct and exclusive military chain of command without interference from politicians. Peking in another broadcast declared: "The plain fact about the Saigon coup which replaced Ngo Dinh Diem's family rule with a military dictatorship is that it was stage-managed by the United States, notwithstanding the flat denial by the U.S. State Department."
Radio Liberation, the NLF clandestine station, November 2, began a series of commentaries devoted to the subject "What is the Most Correct Path of National Salvation." (See Annex) The chief theme in the series was the assertion that the change of government means increased American involvement in the war. "The coup shows that it is the U.S. imperialists who have organized it, with the aim...of tightening up their aggressive war which is meeting with serious defeats.... Everyone sees that the most correct way to solve the problem in South Vietnam is to oppose the U.S. imperialists and whatever clique of lackeys they may have." The station went on, "It is not enough to put down the dictatorial regime of the Ngo Dinh Diem family without cutting the root of that regime, which is the U.S. imperialist policy of aggression, as everyone knows. The U.S. imperialists are the sworn enemy of the Vietnamese people. They have been sending into Vietnam troops... and other war means including chemical poison, plotting to set their colonialist yoke on our people." Leaflets and social movement propaganda activity in the Mekong delta area and high lands stressed this theme also, as is noted below.

2. Lack of viability of new government. The second most prevalent theme in the communist interpretation of events was the assertion that the "new U.S. scheme is doomed to defeat because of inherent contradictions in it." Said the clandestine station: "Concerning the new contradictions in South Vietnam the main and antagonistic contradiction is between the South Vietnamese people including the working class, the petty bourgeoisie, national bourgeoisie, patriotic strata and
personalities on the one side and the U.S. imperialists and their henchmen, including the most pro-American reactionaries among the landlords...the recent coup will lead to another coup. So long as the American imperialists are not wiped out of South Vietnam the main antagonistic contradictions cannot be settled, These can be settled only by the people working within the National Liberation Front.

3. Villification of the members of the new government. This began even before November 1 and increased in intensity during the first week after the overthrow. An example: "In a press interview Duong Van Minh, chieftain of the new puppet regime revealed his true colors as a U.S. lackey. He said that the new military regime 'wants closer cooperation between South Vietnamese and American officers in the future.' He disclosed that the new regime, under the guidance of 'U.S. advisors' would intensify its activities in political deception to coordinate its military oppression of the people." Attacks came by name as well. General Tran Van Don was characterized as "that former puppet acting chief of staff under Diem." General Ton That Dinh was described as "Diem minister of security, known for his bloody repression of the people in enforcing the martial law of August 21...responsible for the massacre of hundreds of Buddhist monks and nuns, students and intellectuals." Nguyen Ngoc Tho "was vice president of the Diem administration...appointed to negotiate with the Buddhist association and as such was opposed to the Buddhists."

4. General hostility to the new regime. The new government
is characterized as a military dictatorship and highly unpopular. For example, these quotations: "Many Saigon people voice indignation at Ton That Dinh for banning demonstrations and meetings and in many places people have set up self-defense armed groups and many soldiers deserted and joined the people's ranks bringing with them their weapons." Or, from Peking, "The Saigon people are discontented with the recent pro-US military coup and have begun to oppose the new military dictatorial regime...Saigon university students plan to stage a demonstration against Nguyen Ngoc Tho's appointment as premier." The clandestine station reported "Young officers who took part in the coup are disgruntled because they have not been promoted by the United States." Division and contradiction among officers native to south Vietnam proper, such as Duong Van Minh and Tran Van Don, and those native of central Vietnam, like Ton That Dinh and Do Cao Tri, are increasing. Contradictions within the military coup continue."

5. Events will lead to new misery for all. The result of the change of government, the communists assert, will be an intensification of the war and this means increased misery for all. The clandestine station is most emphatic on this point. The generals are quoted as saying the war against the communists will be pursued and these statements are twisted to imply that new increased privations and hardships are in store for the Vietnamese. Said the clandestine station: "Thus the coup does not create conditions for assuaging the sufferings our people have endured for nine years, does not lead to a stable situation in South Vietnam, does not respond to the
sacred aspiration for independence, democracy and peace, but
on the contrary opens the way for more serious troubles. There
is now the danger that the war will develop more fiercely,
causing large-scale destruction and killing in our country."

Adaptation of On-Going Communist Themes and Appeals.
There are five major "bread and butter" themes which the
communist propaganda apparatus has used almost continually
since the start of the insurgent movement in Vietnam. Wherever
possible an effort is made to adapt these five to current
events and developments.

1. Enthusiasm for the revolution: The overriding effort
of communist propagandists is to generate and maintain the
spirit of revolt among the South Vietnamese, using the best of
whatever themes are at hand. The main reason for the necessity
of revolt has been the "corrupt, tyrannical nature of the Diem
government." With the overthrow of that government the commu-
nist propagandists now attempt to switch horses and assert
that the struggle goes on, undiminished in popularity. The
clandestine station reports for example, "The South Vietnam
patriotic armed units and people have won many victories in
attacking enemy troops during and after the Saigon pro-US
military coup." Then follows a description of various victories.
Reports Radio Hanoi: "The patriotic forces in South Vietnam
have increased their actions to destroy military posts and
strategic hamlets since the coup d'etat to overthrow the Diem
regime broke out." And there follows a list of strategic
hamlets destroyed. Reports Radio Peking: "People in Saigon and
Cholon have held many demonstrations against the pro-US coup
group. The demonstrators carried placards saying 'Oppose U.S. Imperialist Aggression Against South Vietnam'....Patriotic popular organizations are spreading handbills denouncing U.S. imperialists and their lackeys!" 

2. Certainty of victory. This usually takes the form of propaganda pieces listing ARVN casualties; describing the destruction of war material especially helicopters and, most important, armed forces desertions. Reports the clandestine station: "The South Vietnam People's self defense forces have intensified their attacks on the puppet army after the pro-US military coup...In five days the people's self defense units increased attacks by fifty percent, killed 114 puppet troops and wounded 159...captured 205 weapons and 29 radios." On Nov. 9, the Liberation Press announced that "More than 32,000 troops of the U.S. controlled South Vietnam army rose up against their commanders or went over to the people in the first nine months of 1963....nearly half taking place in July, August and Sep., when the Diem clique was carrying out unprecedented repressions against the Buddhists and others...."Since the U.S.-engineered military coup more and more troops have left their ranks to join the patriotic forces or returned home."

3. Negotiated settlement. This appeal, seeking to "neutralize" South Vietnam and unify Vietnam and take it out of the cold war context, has been dropped almost entirely by the communist propagandists, apparently a tactical move and not representing a change of basic policy. Wherever possible communist output skirts the idea entirely. Where it is forced to generalize on overall objectives it confines itself to statements of
this sort: "As the NLF has often repeated, the South Vietnamese problem must be solved through negotiations among the Vietnamese themselves. Only under this condition will blood stop being shed and can our country develop normally."

4. **Atrocities by the GVN and ARVN.** This has focussed during the past few months on germ warfare type charges with particular emphasis on the GVN defoliation program. This theme continues, describing the "Spread of chemical poisons in Ben Tre.... the spreading of insect larvae on sweet potato fields... the use of noxious chemicals elsewhere...." Also stressed is the idea that nothing has actually been changed, "Scenes of murder, torture, arrests and detention, cases of separation of parents from children and husbands from wives, scenes of destruction of homes and villages all will occur again... South Vietnam remains.... a hell on earth."

5. **Externalization.** This effort, to engender international support continues. The technique used at the moment is quoting of communist and anti-American newspapers on the meaning of the coup.

**Policy Statements Since the Coup:**

The clandestine station has broadcast only two basic policy statements since November 1 (see Annex for excerpts from major statement.) On November 6 at 0548 GMT Radio Hanoi broadcast in English the NLF's eight demands. They are:

1. "Destroy all the strategic hamlets and quarters, and other disguised concentration camps;"

2. "Release all political detainees, whatever their (political) tendencies;"
3. "Promulgate without delay democratic freedom -- freedom of assembly, expression, the press, worship, and trade and so on;

4. "Root out all vestiges of the fascist and militarist dictatorial regime;

5. "Stop all persecution and repression, and raiding operations;

6. "Dissolve all nepotist organizations, all forms of control, 'Republican Youth' organizations and other para-military organizations of youth, women, students and pupils, public employees and peoples;

7. "Immediately stop the forcible conscription and militarization of youth, women, and public servants;

8. "Cancel all kinds of unjustified taxes."

Propaganda Activity in the Mekong Delta.

Normally there is a two to four week time lag between an event and the appearance of printed NLF propaganda on the subject. The NLF in the Mekong Delta in the case of the coup cut this time lag and were distributing leaflets by November 3. All leaflets obtained by the Working Group to date were addressed to ARVN soldiers. A leaflet from Lam Dong province asserted that the coup was "a U.S. conspiracy" and urged people not to be taken in by promises of this "counterfeit liberation."

A leaflet from An Xuyen, after asserting that the change of government was planned by the Americans, declared: "The full scale war in Vietnam will be continued by the Americans, bringing death to you. You are still in danger. Don't be tricked. Even if a coup has been staged war still exists."
then goes on to urge soldiers to desert.

We have only one report to date on social movement propaganda appeals in the Mekong Delta. A report from Long Xuyen says that the armed propaganda teams, in their nocturnal propaganda sessions in isolated villagers are stressing the theme that "Now, the United States is taking over completely and things will be just like they were when the French were here."

Annex I: Comment

Although it would be difficult to document, from the material described above, the contention that communist propagandists are in serious trouble, this is the conclusion reached by the Working Group. It is admittedly a subjective judgment, but one based on the "feel" of communist propaganda and on a study of the ebb and flow of the major themes during the past three years.

The weakness of the appeals is most apparent in the output of the clandestine station which keeps harking back to the July 20, 1963 statement by the NLF central committee, a statement directed against the Diem government and now largely out of date.

The entire structure of the communist propaganda edifice was built on the sins of the Diem regime. This was its strength. This also was its weakness. The entire political climate has changed in Vietnam and the communists for the moment are left almost without propaganda ammunition (other than U.S. imperialism). Within six months perhaps it will be able to assemble some material dealing with grievances, real or imagined. But in the meantime we have a honeymoon period.

SAIGON, VIETNAM

The Liberation Station (clandestine) at 0500 GMT November 5, 1963, broadcast in Vietnamese a statement which in all probability was intended for policy use by NLF cadres throughout Vietnam. As is often the case with major developments, the NLF clandestine station broadcasts policy statements which are copied and reproduced throughout the rural area.

The statement began: "On November 1, 1963 a military coup took place in Saigon, initiated by a number of leaders of the southern army to overthrow the regime of the Ngo Dinh Diem family.

While firing between coup troops and Diemist troops was still going on, the coup's leading organization, the Council of General, proclaimed its fundamental policies, the main content of which is that it will pursue the anti-communist struggle, will continue siding with the Americans, and will pursue the war -- that is, pursue the entire treacherous business that Ngo Dinh Diem followed for nine years. The military orders issued by the coup leaders in the past few days obviously aim at maintaining in the most thorough way the policies and organizations of the Ngo Dinh Diem regime, repeating what that traitor had done, and overtly showing their intention to resist the people.

"Thus, the coup not only does not create conditions for assuaging the sufferings our people have endured for nine years, does not lead to a stable situation in South Vietnam nor does it respond to the sacred aspiration for independence, democracy, and peace of our nation. On the contrary, it opens the way for
more serious trouble. There is the danger that the war will develop more fiercely, causing large-scale destruction and killing in our country.

"It is obvious that the November one coup does not contribute to restricting and ending the aggressive war of the U.S. imperialists in South Vietnam, the major disaster of our nation. On the contrary, it is a premonitory sign of an intensification of this war. Moreover, the South Vietnamese face the threat of a new military dictatorial regime. Faced with this situation, the NLF spokesman was authorized to make the following statement:"

Then follows a standard historical account of the past nine years in Vietnam, ending with the sentence "Under these conditions the U.S. imperialists actively maneuvered to swap horses in midstream, hoping to replace the Ngo Dinh Diem lackey clique, which was no longer useful, by another lackey clique in order to deceive public opinion, to create conditions -- they thought -- favorable to their present aggressive war, and to pursue their aggressive policies. The November 1963 coup had been planned by the U.S. imperialists for months."

In assessing the new government, the NLF declared:

"Thus, the adjective revolutionary that the coup leaders attributed to their actions cannot deceive public opinion. The latter correctly realize that while Ngo Dinh Diem was forced to kill himself, the Ngo Dinh Diem regime is maintained and, moreover, is embellished by new adjectives.

"We are of the opinion that under the present circumstances, anyone who exercises power in South Vietnam is not supported by the people if he does not satisfy the fundamental aspirations
of the southern people. He must abolish strategic hamlets and wards which are camouflaged concentration camps. He must release all persons jailed for political reasons, no matter to what political tendencies they belong. He must immediately grant democratic freedoms, such as freedom of assembly, freedom of organization, labor union freedom, freedom of speech and the press, freedom of belief, and freedom of trade. He must eliminate to the root all vestiges of the dictatorial, fascist, militarist regime. He must put an end to terror, oppression, and raids. He must dissolve the inter-family organizations, all oppressive forces, the republican youth organization, and all para-military organizations among the youth, women, students, public servants, and the people. He must put an end to all unreasonable arrests... We are of the opinion that the Nov. one coup will have a positive meaning if the coup leaders resolutely try to escape the U.S. imperialists' grip and are sufficiently independent to abandon the path of struggling against the fatherland and the people if the coup leaders do not draw useful lessons from the immediate realities and continue following Ngo Dinh Diem's footsteps, they will be resisted by the people and their own soldiers and will be unable to avoid defeat.

"The conclusion drawn from the coup by all strata of southern people is that they must continue their resistance more resolutely than ever and that the revolutionary road which they have followed on their own is the unique road leading to the liberation of their own families and the fatherland."

On the possibilities of a negotiated end to the war, the
statement declared, "As the N.F has often repeated, the South Vietnamese problem must be solved through negotiations among the Vietnamese themselves. Only under this condition will blood stop being shed and can our country develop normally."

It concludes: "Undeniably, the November one coup reflects the extreme weakness and impasse of the U.S. imperialists in South Vietnam. As a result of this the aggressors and their henchmen will fall more deeply both politically and physically. Greater internal dissension will prevail in their ranks, and it will be utterly impossible for them to avoid complete failures."