

# VIETNAM: A COUNTRY AT WAR

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The cruel frontless war against the Communist-directed guerrilla movement dwarfed or directed all other policies of the Republic of Vietnam during 1962. As the year began, the Communists were in the clear ascendancy. Radio Hanoi had claimed in late 1961 that the National Liberation Front, as the movement calls itself, had "liberated" 1,100 of 1,290 villages in the southern region of the Republic and 4,000 of 4,400 hamlets in the central highlands. The claim does not appear to be too much inflated, for the Communists had in fact extended their influence, in varying degrees, to about 80% of the Vietnamese countryside. Where this influence was strong, the government administration had been ejected entirely from the villages and hamlets or else was hemmed into well-protected district or village centers. Where this influence was partial, officials lived in constant fear or followed government orders by day and Communist orders by night. The Civil Guard, a paramilitary organization under the jurisdiction of the province chiefs, and the village-based Self-Defense Corps made little effort to seek out the enemy but rather holed up in their defense posts and bunkers; and even regular troops ran strong risks when they entered areas of heavy Communist control.

The erosion of government authority outside the cities had been moving at an accelerated pace since late 1959, when the Vietnamese Communists launched their military offensive in an already politically prepared countryside. The Communist advance was slowed down, if not halted, during 1962. Primarily responsible was the tremendous build-up in the Vietnamese government's armed capability during the year, and a determination to drive the Communists away from the cities, out of the villages, and back into their base areas in the mountains, swamps, and other uninhabited parts of the country. In the first place, the size of the government's armed forces increased by two-thirds, the army rising to 200,000, the Civil Guard to 72,000, and the Self-Defense Corps to 80,000. In addition, the government began arming special defense groups formed in loyal villages and hamlets. Secondly, the quality of the armed forces was improved appreciably. The Civil Guard and Self-Defense Corps, which had been ragamuffin outfits, ill-trained, ill-equipped, and generally neglected, at last received the attention which their important auxiliary role in the country's defense deserved. The United States provided the financial support and military hardware for this build-up. Indeed, it has given the Ngo Dinh Diem government all needed means to fight the war, including attack bombers, troop-carrying helicopters, amphibious assault vehicles, and patrol vessels.

The second reason for the slow-down of Communist ambitions in Vietnam has been the strategic hamlet program. Between 1959 and 1961, the Vietnamese government had tried to bring security to the countryside through the erection of agrovilles, peasant cities built according to a master plan by forced labor and providing electricity, schools, clinics, and other amenities of urban life. The strategic hamlet idea is a more modest continuation of the agrovilles. Its basic aim is simple: to fortify the most populous part of existing hamlets and to organize the people within into a highly controlled and partially trained security garrison. Moats, fences, sharpened bamboo stakes, and look-out bunkers are built around the perimeter of a hamlet. Peasants living outside the enclosed area are asked to move inside at the risk of being treated as hostile, or they may be forced inside. Families suspected of Communist sympathies are placed under special observation or may be transferred to other localities, and the existing hamlet will be destroyed and its inhabitants moved elsewhere if Communist influence is too great or if the terrain is unsuitable for defense.

There are about 16,000 hamlets in South Vietnam, of which the Vietnamese government intends to fortify two-thirds. The strategy, which was not always followed in 1962, is to begin with the least insecure areas and to extend the peasant outposts further and further into Communist-infected territory as the army sweeps out the enemy. The strategic hamlet program was pushed very strongly during 1962, to the neglect of much other government business at the local levels, and it reached approximately its half-way point at the end of the year. The purpose of the program is to cut the link between the villages and the guerrilla forces, regardless of whether that link was forged through sympathy or terror. It seeks to deprive the guerrillas of the taxes, food, recruits, and shelter which the villages have afforded them, and to drive them into the open. The program also seeks to create "kill zones" of the unenclosed countryside, in which nationalist troops, artillery, and air power may hunt down the foe without worrying about striking the innocent as well. Finally, the government hopes to be able to turn over hamlet and village defense to their occupants, backed by locally stationed Self-Defense and Civil Guard units, and thereby to free the army for large-scale offensive operations against the regular troops of the Communists.

It is too early to say whether the Vietnamese government's new military strength and rural security program will shift the tide of war. It is clear that the tempo of the war rose in 1962, with military casualties on both sides averaging about 1,000 a week through most of the year. It is likewise clear that the Communists at least temporarily lost the military initiative. Government forces, including specially trained Ranger units, sought out the enemy much more frequently and they enjoyed much greater mobility, thanks to the use of helicopters, amphibious troop carriers, and small river craft. The most dramatic expression of the government's new military posture were the large offensive sweeps it conducted against Communist base-areas, particularly in the Mekong delta. In August and October 1962,

for example, between 4,000 and 5,000 troops, many of them carried by helicopters, were thrown into encircling operations in the Camau peninsula and the Tay Ninh region northwest of Saigon, respectively. American and Vietnamese official sources were claiming by the middle of the year that Communist losses were exceeding those of the nationalists by a substantial margin, that the number of desertions from the Communist side was rising, and that more intelligence was flowing in from the villagers.

The military picture in 1962 was not so bright as the above would suggest. For one thing, Communist capability was not seriously weakened, and, in fact, the number of regular guerrilla troops increased by about 5,000 over the 1961 level, to about 25,000. The guerrillas were, moreover, better trained, better armed, and better led than in the past, and they seemed to have little trouble making up their losses through local recruitment and infiltration from North Vietnam. In the second place, the government's offensive posture still left a great deal to be desired. Putting aside for the moment the problem of central leadership, it is apparent that government military strategy was still tied to conventional defense. Government forces in 1962 thought largely in terms of defense posts and bunkers, the control of roads and other communication axes, and pitched battles, while the guerrillas thought in terms of people and countryside and quick thrusts at exposed positions. The government's airborne sweeps did, to be sure, throw the enemy off balance and resulted in the capture of supplies and the killing of Communist soldiers. Their success, however, has been exaggerated. The weakest element in these operations was the absence of any attempt to hold down territory cleared of the enemy, with the result that he filtered back in as government troops withdrew. The number of Communist troops killed in these operations was not high in proportion to the number of troops which the government engaged; indeed, one must treat the Vietnamese government's battle statistics in general with considerable caution.<sup>1</sup>

The success of the strategic hamlet program will not be known for a time. However, the brief history of the program gives some reason for optimism. Despite the Radio Hanoi boast, in August 1962, that 256 strategic hamlets had been destroyed in five provinces alone during the early months of the year, it appears that only a small portion of these fortified places were in fact overrun. Some of the strategic hamlets were immune to attack, according to report, because they had been taken over from the inside, thereby joining the Communist network of "combat hamlets." Also, most of the hamlets could not furnish more than a delaying defense against attack, and thus large numbers of government troops had to be tied down in readiness to come to their aid. In the central highlands, the program was unexpectedly successful. Disaffected in the past by the Vietnamese gov-

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<sup>1</sup> To give but one example: a United Press International despatch in the *New York Times*, May 13, 1962, p. 1, presented the Vietnamese government's figure of 300 guerrillas killed in a major sweep. The *Times*, May 14, 1962, p. 3, reported, on the information of a senior American military advisor in Vietnam, that no more than 20 guerrillas actually were killed in this operation.

ernment's treatment of them as inferior peoples and by the settlement of nearly 200,000 Vietnamese in their midst, the tribal minorities appeared to be turning away from the Communists in 1962. They generally accepted relocation or the fortifying of their settlements, and a number of them were trained and armed in order to provide for their own defense. More encouraging still was the flow of highlanders into government-controlled areas. According to the Vietnamese government, more than 100,000 tribesmen left their forest and mountain locations in order to seek security during the second half of the year. If this exodus was truly voluntary, it would constitute the greatest single achievement of the government during the year.

There is little question but that North Vietnam launched and directs the guerrilla war being fought on Southern soil. The United States, which was then in the act of greatly augmenting its own assistance to the South, formally made this charge, with persuasive supporting evidence, in December 1961.<sup>2</sup> The North was publicly reprimanded again in June 1962, this time by the International Commission for Supervision and Control in Vietnam, the body charged with keeping the peace under the terms of the 1954 Geneva Agreements. It had, according to the Commission, sent men, arms and other supplies into the South for hostile purposes and had incited activities aimed at the overthrow of the Diem regime.<sup>3</sup> The Commission did not try to evaluate the extent of direct Northern involvement in South Vietnam, and this remains a debatable question. The official charges of the South Vietnamese government to the contrary, it appears that most of the guerrillas operating in the South have been locally recruited and that most of the weapons and other supplies available to them have been locally procured. Those who have been sent down from the North have been nearly all Southerners regrouped after Geneva, and they have consisted mostly of political and military cadres, though entire military units are reported to have been passed into southern territory as well. Some Communist-bloc weapons have been captured in the South, and it is possible that many of the older French and American weapons which the guerrillas use were sent from North Vietnam. Certainly the long undefended Laotian border and the Pathet Lao-controlled eastern corridor of Laos make for easy transit between Communist and nationalist Vietnam.

The Soviet Union and Communist China have thus far confined their activities in the Vietnamese conflict to warnings that American "aggression against the South" must stop. Soviet threats have been milder than those issued by the Chinese, and the Soviets reportedly counseled the North Vietnamese in February 1962 not to engage in tactics which could embroil the major powers in a war over Vietnam. Both Communist countries have

<sup>2</sup> United States, Department of State, *A Threat to the Peace: North Viet Nam's Effort to Conquer South Viet Nam*, 2 parts, Far Eastern Series 110 (Washington, December 1961).

<sup>3</sup> International Commission for Supervision and Control in Vietnam, *Special Report to the Co-Chairmen of the Geneva Conference on Indo-China* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, June 2, 1962).

been providing substantial economic and military aid to the Ho Chi Minh government. The latter, which has remained remarkably stable in its top leadership since 1954, continued to mark an evenly balanced course between the two rival Communist powers.

Of more direct concern to South Vietnam than Russia and China has been the attitude of its two close neighbors, Cambodia and Laos. The Diem government was opposed to a neutralist solution in Laos, fearing the weakening of its northwestern flank, and when Laos carried neutralism to the point of recognizing the Democratic Republic of North Vietnam, in November 1962, the South immediately broke off diplomatic relations with its neighbor. South Vietnam's difficulties with Cambodia stem from historical rivalries, sharpened by modern-day Cambodian neutralism and Vietnamese charges that guerrillas have been operating from Cambodian soil. Prince Sihanouk's prediction, in November 1961, of a Communist victory in South Vietnam did little to improve relations between the two countries during 1962, and minor border clashes, disputed control by South Vietnam of two small islands in the Gulf of Thailand, and the Communist-bases-in-Cambodia issue served to worsen them.

If the Ngo Dinh Diem government faced unremitting Northern enmity and discouraging neutrality on the part of Cambodia and Laos in 1962, it could console itself with the reaffirmed support of its Western allies. The United States in particular showed itself to be an unstinting friend. The year 1961 had nearly closed on a much sourer note. In November of that year, the United States had tried to extract a number of important concessions from the Vietnamese leadership as a condition for increased aid. It had asked President Diem to decentralize his control over administrative and military operations, to provide better coordination of the government's multiple and chaotic intelligence operations, and to grant more political freedom to the Vietnamese people.<sup>4</sup> The Vietnamese leaders responded with bitter recriminations and planted newspaper articles which wondered if Vietnam should not reconsider its relations with America. The outcome of the negotiations was announced in early January 1962. The Vietnamese obtained what they wanted from them: a large increase in American aid to the Vietnamese budget and more and more potent military hardware. The United States emerged with some minor concessions and some vague promises of change. It was clear that the United States had not only committed itself fully to the defense of South Vietnam but also to accepting the Ngo Dinh Diem regime on its own terms.

Both commitments were honored in 1962. War materiel was poured into the country and, with it, a greatly expanded American military mission, composed largely of specialists in anti-guerrilla warfare. In February, the military mission was recognized and put under the command of a full general, Paul Harkins, in order, according to the *New York Times*, to provide the organizational framework for possible large-scale American

<sup>4</sup> *New York Times*, November 27, 1961, p. 1; Agence France Presse despatch from Saigon, November 24, 1961.

intervention in Vietnam.<sup>5</sup> This intervention did not occur, but the number of American military personnel did increase from 865 in November 1961 to 10,000 a year later. The changed character of the American role in Vietnam was not lost upon the International Control Commission. In the same report which found fault with the North, the Commission declared that the South Vietnamese government had violated the Geneva arrangements by receiving war materiel in excess of the Geneva limitations and by establishing a "factual military alliance" with the United States. The new American role in Vietnam was reflected also in the special tasks assumed by American officers and enlisted men. American pilots participated in air strikes against enemy positions, American vessels helped patrol the waters below the 17th Parallel, American helicopter crews carried Vietnamese troops—and their American advisors—into combat; American soldiers, in short, were engaged in a wide range of military activities bringing them into direct contact with the enemy. While the American government insisted that the American military role in Vietnam was still an advisory and training one, the statistics told a different story: during the first ten months of 1962, 34 American military personnel were killed and 85 more were wounded.

The willingness of the United States to support the Ngo Dinh Diem government was limited mainly by economics in the year just ended. The Vietnamese government has depended since its beginning on American aid to meet the bulk of its budget costs and to maintain the living standards of its people. This dependence grew in 1962. The three-to-one imbalance of imports over exports which existed in previous years grew even greater, as exports fell off for the second consecutive year. At the same time, Vietnam's budget needs rose as a result of military expansion and the rural-security program. The major source of Vietnamese revenue has been the commercial import program, by means of which American aid dollars are converted into piasters through the foreign purchases of private entrepreneurs. The United States agreed to increase the program in 1962, but the Vietnamese economy was not able to absorb the level of imports required to generate sufficient local currency. Since the Vietnamese government's principal taxation is customs duties, its own revenues were seriously affected by the strain on the commercial import mechanism. Caught in this squeeze, the government was compelled to engage in deficit spending, a step which has led to increased living costs for its people. Vietnam could not have survived without American aid during 1962, but neither could the availability of this aid extricate the country from all its economic difficulties.

The United States decided on the eve of 1962 that the guerrilla war could be won with the present Vietnamese leadership and that a change of leadership would be for the worse and could lead to chaos. It subsequently made its unequivocal support of Ngo Dinh Diem clear to those who might try to depose him. For example, after two South Vietnamese air

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<sup>5</sup> See February 9, 1962, pp. 1, 8, and February 11, 1962, p. 14.

force planes attacked the Presidential Palace in February 1962, President Kennedy quickly made known his relief that the Vietnamese leader was unharmed, in order "to provide him with the greatest possible backing in the event that the rebel pilots might enjoy any sympathies in South Vietnam."<sup>6</sup> Earlier that month the American ambassador to Vietnam publicly told Diem's nationalist opponents that the United States fully backed the Vietnamese President and called upon the opposition to cooperate with Diem. The United States apparently hoped that it might induce Diem himself to be more cooperative by this approach. There may also have been the hope of quietly draining off Diem's authority as American advisors and specialists moved into Vietnam in increasing numbers. Clearly the United States wanted to dispel the suspicions of American intentions which had developed in the minds of Diem and his family.

None of these things yet has happened. Ngo Dinh Diem remained the master of Vietnam in 1962, and he relied more on his family and less on his domestic and foreign supporters than probably any time in the past. Needed reforms were not instituted, criticism was still strongly controlled, outside advice strongly resented, and American motives highly suspected. The Vietnamese leadership seemed to be more than ever isolated from its own people, and public morale, at least in the cities, was at a low. Thus, while the military situation in Vietnam improved somewhat during the year, the political situation worsened. The United States was the Vietnamese government's main prop, but it was not able to influence to any appreciable extent the policies of that government. If Ngo Dinh Diem is, as the Vietnamese Communists charge, an American puppet, he was a puppet that pulled the strings in 1962.

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, February 28, 1962, p. 2.

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