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Report on the MSU-Vietnam Project

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In some respects reviewing the Michigan State-Vietnam Project is like delving into old history. It was among the first of this university's technical cooperation projects abroad. The old Foreign Operations Administration which sponsored the project, was succeeded years ago by the International Cooperation Administration which has since been replaced by the present Agency for International Development. Within Michigan State, the project's origin predated by several years the establishment of the International Programs office and the systematic concern for the University's international role which that office represents. The project originated very early in this nation's active involvement in the states of the former French Indo-China, shortly after the Korean War, and in a period of insecurity, perhaps even instability, in the Philippines, Malaya, and mainland areas of Southeast Asia. The project began at a time when French rule was ending in Vietnam, when the new nationalist government in Saigon, in the view of almost all observers, offered the best hope for the people of South Vietnam.

Since those days over eleven years ago, as a result of experience in Vietnam and elsewhere, we have learned much about university cooperative efforts abroad, about technical assistance projects and means of encouraging social, economic and political development. We still don't know as much as we would like to know, but the search for knowledge goes on.

This report, while reviewing briefly the work of the University in Vietnam with one eye on recent published harsh criticisms of our work there, will focus also on lessons learned. Such lessons form the basis of this and many other universities' efforts to aid modernization and development internationally, for if we have learned anything at all from our experience, it is that the tremendously vital tasks which we face in our efforts abroad require the best we can give.

The project in Vietnam was large and complex and operated during its seven year history in an environment of varying degrees of instability and difficulty. We went

[April 1966]

- 2 -

into the project at the request of the US government aid program and of Vietnamese Premier, later President, Ngo Dinh Diem. Both governments sought ways of fostering economic and social progress and our program in public administration and police administration was one part (less than 1%) of a very large and comprehensive US economic and technical aid program to Vietnam, running between \$100 and \$200 million per year.

The Michigan State University Advisory Group was composed of specialists in various fields of public administration, political science, police administration, economics and other social sciences. The central purpose was to strengthen the administrative services of the new Vietnamese government through training, research and advisory services. MSU staff members also advised the US aid mission directly on matters within individual fields of competence, such as tax reform, economic analysis, and projections, civil police communications and organizations, and similar fields.

In underdeveloped countries, problems of administration are frequently acute and stand in the way of orderly progress toward social and economic development. Problems related to enforcement of law and order, administration of programs in cities and countryside, training of civil servants to work effectively with the public and to plan and manage new programs were recognized as crucial matters in Vietnam as in many other nations emerging from a colonial period. Therefore, the MSU program, which was part of a broad approach to these problems, was given high priority by the Vietnamese government and the American aid mission in Saigon.

The program was negotiated during the crisis period of late 1954 and began in early 1955, when the security of even the city of Saigon was still in doubt. At the outset, programs of an immediate impact nature were stressed including studies and recommendations leading to the rehabilitation of 900,000 refugees who had just arrived from the North, and to administrative reorganization efforts to help bring central government programs to rural and remote areas of the country. The obvious civil insecurity which prevailed in 1955 brought about almost an immediate expansion

[April 1966]

- 3 -

of the police administration side of the program.

In 1957, the MSU program shifted to longer range program goals. This meant that the new National Institute of Administration, whose establishment MSU had assisted and which was viewed as the main vehicle for bringing a new and liberalized administration to the country, received more attention. The Institute offered a three year college level degree program for young career civil servants, special night school and in-service training courses for civil servants of various levels. It had a rapidly expanding library in public administration and the social sciences. It began a modest research and publication program aimed at administrative and governmental improvement. It drew its faculty from Saigon University, from the MSU team, and from Vietnamese educated abroad. An important part of the MSU effort was devoted to strengthening and encouraging the work of the Institute and its faculty. Many of the faculty members and promising Vietnamese administrators in various government services were brought to MSU and other US schools for additional training.

MSU staff members did research on the organization and operations of Vietnamese government agencies and advised them in such fields as budgetary and fiscal administration, civil service reform, and organization and management. Direct MSU advisory services to agencies declined, as emphasis on the work of the National Institute increased over the years of the project. MSU also counseled the US aid mission on the construction of new in-service training facilities in the countryside, and on new buildings for the National Institute, which were completed in the early 1940's in Saigon.

The Michigan State project included a major effort to help train and reorganize the civil police forces of the new South Vietnamese nation. When the first members of the MSU advisory group arrived in Vietnam in 1955, civil disorders in the form of frequent terrorist activity in the streets of Saigon and extreme insecurity in the countryside were a part of the reality of the situation. The civil police administration program which MSU had contracted to undertake in behalf of the US aid mission was given high priority.

[April 1966]

The Michigan State University Department of Police Administration provided substantive and administrative support for this part of the effort in Vietnam. Members of its staff participated in the planning of the program and in carrying it out. In order to carry out the police training responsibility Michigan State recruited and hired people with various types of police experience and knowledge. The department faculty was not large enough to meet the needs in Vietnam without this outside recruitment. Included were leading police administrators screened, recruited and hired from state police forces within the United States, from city police and other civil police organizations.

Since police advisory services and training were being provided to the various components of the Vietnamese police force, a wide range of specialists had to be a part of the MSU team. Some of these police specialists were in the counter-subversive field, a main task which the Vietnamese police faced. To provide these advisory services the MSU group hired persons nominated by the US government. All such individuals, a relatively small number in total, were involved in training or advisory functions, were known to the Vietnamese government, and were under the authority of the University team in Vietnam. There were no "undercover operating agents" within the MSU group, but there were individuals involved in training and advising Vietnamese civil police officers who had to deal with counter-subversive problems.

The MSU civil police efforts were considered by the Vietnamese and American observers to be of high quality and on several occasions an expansion in the effort was urged upon the University. However, because the size of the Vietnam Project had made it overly demanding on University staff resources, because too many outsiders had to be employed to fulfill responsibilities, and because the University itself had been re-thinking the overall basis of its international efforts, the University decided after several years of experience to reduce the size of the group, particularly the civil police administration side. In 1957 the reduction was set in motion, and by mid-1959, a good share of the reduced police administration division was

[April 1966]

- 5 -

actually drawn from the MSU campus staff and a number of police administration activities had been reduced or eliminated including specialized training programs such as those in the counter-subversive field.

It should be emphasized that all persons working for the Michigan State team in Saigon were interviewed and hired by the University. It maintained control over all of its personnel and could have removed any of its staff from Saigon. All were involved in training and advisory services clearly known to the Vietnamese government and requested by it. None were engaged in spying or counter espionage. Those hired outside were designated as specialists or advisors. They were not given academic rank or title.

Equipment for the Vietnamese civil police forces were made available by the US aid mission in Vietnam. Except for small amounts of equipment for training purposes, such equipment was not handled or purchased by the University but instead was part of the normal flow of US aid support in many fields, e.g. agriculture, education, public works and public health. This aid was fully known and open to inspection by the International Control Commission. MSU police administrators gave advice on the purchase of such equipment. Since the needs were great and included vehicles, communications equipment, small arms, training aids, and specialized police equipment, the volume in the flow of such aid was large and several members of the MSU team spent a good share of their time assuring that the equipment purchases were administered well, until the aid office in Saigon could assume this function directly.

At peak strength in 1958 the group consisted of about 50 staff members, about half in police administration. During most of the project's life, the group numbered less than thirty. In 1959 and 1960 the group entered a period of gradual reduction. In 1962, the Vietnamese government decided against contract renewal, mainly because it objected to what it considered unfriendly and overly critical attitudes and writing by various members of the group and because it realized the University would not impose controls on its staff. Therefore, instead of retaining four or five specialists in Vietnam for a final two years as planned, the group withdrew entirely

[April 1966]

in mid-1962.

During the life of MSU in Saigon, the situation changed from severe insecurity in the city and countryside, to relative peace and progress after 1956, and by 1960, to increasing turbulence and guerrilla warfare. Relations with both Vietnamese and American authorities were generally good, but definitely had their ups and downs.

Main accomplishments included the group's participation in the successful resettlement of the refugees, the launching of a greatly expanded, more vigorous program at the new National Institute of Administration, reform in budgetary administration, initiation of new police training institutions, and introduction of more modern police administration methods. Some of the many studies of Vietnamese society, agencies, and problems published by MSU and resulting from the work of the MSU staff continue to be used and reprinted. Without a detailed check, one can identify at least seven published books, 25 published monographic studies and texts, at least 30 mimeographed study and survey reports plus many articles. There were other accomplishments. As the years passed, the mounting pressure of insecurity in the countryside as Viet Cong ambushes and assassinations increased greatly limited the Michigan State effort as it did other significant technical assistance efforts supported by the US government in Vietnam.

What are some of the lessons learned which now influence university international efforts?

First, the University is now interested in programs which are of service abroad and at the same time provide a maximum of "feedback" to the academic programs in East Lansing. The Vietnam project predated the MSU Asian Studies Center and most other organized international concern on campus including the International Programs office. This may be one reason why there was not enough observable, organized academic "feedback," although research and writing by individual members of the group did occur and numerous Vietnamese students came to MSU in academic pursuits. Overseas programs are now conducted so as to increase the value to academic interests at Michigan State University, through expanded research emphasis, graduate student

[April 1966]

fellowship arrangements and in other ways. Somehow the Vietnam project did not result in any Vietnam language and area studies at MSU. In this respect an important opportunity was lost, and the University therefore has not been able to contribute to the much needed continuing expansion of expertise and specialists on Vietnam. This mistake would probably not have occurred had the project been started three or four years later.

A second lesson pertains to the size of the project. The Vietnam project was too large for the University to staff appropriately, particularly in view of the specialized programs involved. This meant that too many outsiders had to be hired. Although many of the outsiders were of very high quality and contributed well in Vietnam, they changed the nature and tone of the team, and affected the homogeneity and cohesiveness of the group. They diluted the chance for academic feedback to the campus. This situation was recognized early in the project's history and had improved greatly by 1959. But the University would not again become responsible for such a large project which could not be staffed mainly by interested MSU faculty members. Nor would it hire people nominated by US government agencies without being completely sure of the legitimacy of their backgrounds. Personnel with ties to the CIA would not be acceptable.

Out of the Vietnam and other experiences has come a clear and strong preference for overseas development projects which stress the building of new educational institutions. Experience has shown that the University can best devote its talents to teaching, consulting, and researching in relation to the building up of educational institutions (preferably universities) and the strengthening of scholarship abroad. The University attempts to stress institution-building efforts in close collaboration with local academic leaders. In Vietnam, institution building was important in both the police and public administration programs, but it was not sufficiently dominant in the overall effort.

The University learned in Vietnam that some fields are too sensitive or too close to the power centers within government to permit successful university

[April 1966]

technical assistance activities. These sensitive areas may include some of the most important fields, such as tax policy and police administration, fields in which assistance is badly needed in developing countries. But, depending on the situation in the specific country, some fields are too difficult, too sensitive for university effort, and should be covered instead by international organization or direct US government assistance teams.

Broadly speaking, these are some of the conclusions drawn from the Vietnam and other projects during the early years of overseas project activity. The criticism which the University is now receiving because of its Vietnam project reflects in some instances, actual weaknesses in the Vietnam project, grossly exaggerated and distorted as part of the tense search for explanations of our present difficult national position in Vietnam. The University's work in Saigon has also received high praise, and this, too, was probably exaggerated. An accurate and careful analysis and evaluation at some future date will probably show that some praise and also some criticism are deserved and that, as in most complex human endeavors, successful effort and wise judgment are also accompanied by inadequacies. The important point which we hope would also come through clearly in such a future analysis, would be that the University learned important lessons from the experience and went on to wiser, more effective, more valuable international endeavors.