

U.S. DEEPLY INVOLVED IN THE UNCERTAIN STRUGGLE FOR VIETNAM

THE STRUGGLE: Saigon Is Making Some Progress Against Guerrillas as U.S. Steps Up Aid

By DAVID HALBERSTAM

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SAIGON, Vietnam, Oct. 20— This is a war where the winner sometimes appears to be the man who will go into the swamp, stay the longest time and emerge with the biggest leeches.

It is a clumsy and endlessly frustrating war where it is harder to find the enemy than to kill him and where it is often impossible to separate the cruel and dedicated foe you want to kill from the simple and illiterate peasant you want to woo.

It has been going on in one form or another since World War II, and even those Vietnamese who are optimistic about their chances point out that if they are successful, it will never end. As a war, it is a long way from the days of the bigger bang for a buck; and yet in its almost antediluvian fashion it may well be the war of the future.

The United States' effort here represents Washington's attempt to meet the enemy at his own game under his own rules; it is an effort to turn the tide on the part of a new generation of Americans. Yet it is a curious kind of involvement for Americans, who like their enemies identifiable, their wars black and white, their victories tangible.

The Ultimate Factor

How deeply is the United States committed here? Americans and Vietnamese live together, march together, fight together and die together, and it is hard to get much more involved than that. For the men in the field, it is an ultimate commitment, whereas for Washington it remains still a partial commitment, a sort of hide-and-seek involvement. Sometimes Washington seems to be more sensitive about reporters writing about Americans killing Communists than it is about Communists killing Americans.

Yet because this is a land where the cold war is more than cold, the American commitment here is particularly steep in normal terms of aid. The usual yearly formula of large amounts of economic aid, considerable military aid and a few hundred military advisers was found to be painfully inadequate in the face of the imminent danger of another drain and another country going down it.

Guerrilla Tactics

So the decision was made to try and match the Communist guerrilla tactics with counter-guerrilla tactics to give the Vietnamese Army the best Washington had in weapons and advisers. Since then 10,000 of the very best men the United States can muster have come to train the Vietnamese and to provide means of finding the enemy in this particularly brutal terrain.

For this is not a country of gentle, rolling hills. It seems to suddenly jump from rugged mountains to endless marshy swamps; it looks as if it were designed by some guerrilla general for his own war games.

Today the American advisers are all over this country, living with Vietnamese companies in the swamps or alone with platoons in some far mountain outpost. Choppers and amphibious carriers have made it possible to pursue the enemy in terrain previously out of Saigon's reach. Radios and other equipment have given the Vietnamese a desperately needed communications system.

More and more Vietnamese military units are receiving special training and the Government is showing much more military initiative than it did a year ago.

Yet it is not an American war. The Americans here are not in a command position, they are advisers and there is no law that says the Vietnamese have to listen to their advice. Thus, there is an uneasy feeling

among many Americans in the field that they simply have not been given leverage to do the necessary job, and this tempers any optimism about what is happening now and what to expect in the future.

Uncertain Country

In a sense the United States aid here is a simple thing. It is designed to provide to a new, struggling and uncertain country—a country thereby particularly vulnerable to subversion by an old and practiced hand—that which the country cannot provide for itself. If the Government is good enough and if the advice of Americans is heeded and if the Vietnamese themselves are willing to pay the necessary price, goes the thinking, then this war can be won.

Yet if time eventually shows that this type of aid is inadequate and that is a constant possibility, then there are few alternatives left to Washington. One is the open commitment of American combat troops, the ultimate involvement. Undoubtedly Americans, after bumbling around for a few months learning the terrain, would fight well. But the French fought well here, too; and whether the Americans would fight well enough to offset the fact that once again this would be a war of Asians against white men on Asian soil is dubious.

Most people here believe that this would inevitably play into the hands of the Communists and that much of the peasantry, presently indifferent to the war around it, would side with the Communists.

Another alternative and one feared privately by many Vietnamese is that if, after a period of time the war does not produce expected results, it will be off to Geneva again to create some sort of coalition, neutralist government, just the kind of government the Communists demand daily in their propaganda broadcasts.

In the continual attempt to judge how well the war is going and how the increased American aid has affected it, there sometimes seems a tendency to describe results before they have been attained and a parallel tendency to discredit pessimistic reporting. After all, it is said, how can anyone really judge how a war like this is going. Similarly, there might be a tendency to select what evidence you want to show that it is, indeed, going well. Thus in recent months a stream of V.I.P.'s and local officials has breathed the official line of cautious optimism until it seems that each man, buoyed by the optimism of the last, is a bit more optimistic than his predecessor.

Official Optimism

It should be reported that there is considerably less optimism out in the field than in Washington or in Saigon and that the closer one gets to the actual contact level of this war, the farther one gets from official optimism.

It is by anyone's standards an almost impossible war to measure, lacking front lines and accurate statistics about each side's losses and accurate knowledge of the enemy's strength and problems.

On the Vietcong side, it is a war of stealth, of waiting and biding time and then striking quickly and brutally. A platoon of Vietcong guerrillas plans an attack on a Government outpost in the mountains. The guerrillas spread through the district like the peasants, then gather on one night. One man has slipped inside for subversion. He opens the village gate and eight guerrillas are suddenly inside. There is a quick burst of automatic weapon fire and the fight is over before it started.

The Americans are bothered by the Vietnamese failure to patrol, their tendency to leave the choppers and move single file from place to place, the lack of a sense of urgency in

the fight against a quick and elusive enemy. There is some feeling on the part of Americans in the field that, despite all the talk of counter-guerrilla tactics, the real battle has yet to be joined.

"Sometimes I think that this war is being officially reported to look good on the short-range progress reports," one high American officer said. "Some basic things just aren't being corrected, and I don't know if we're in a position to correct them."

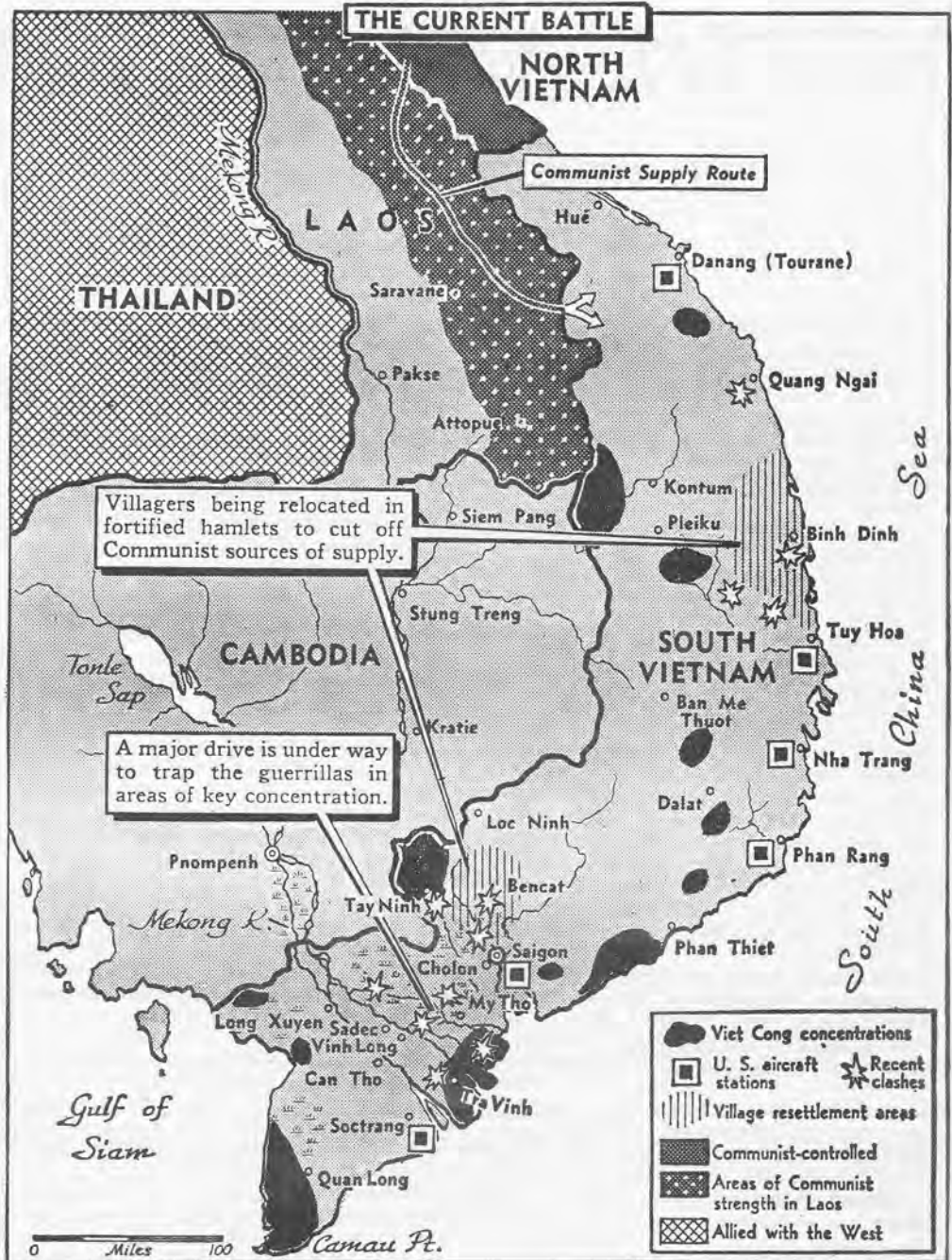
Yet the war is going better than it went a year ago, when it was going very badly indeed. It is true that the Government Army is taking an increasing initiative against the enemy and that in many areas, for the first time in years, the Vietcong must be careful because of the Government's new striking power.

Yet much optimism seems still unwarranted. This is a war fought in the presence of a largely uncommitted or somewhat unfriendly peasantry by a Government that has yet to demonstrate much appeal to large elements of its own people. The enemy is lean and hungry, experienced in this type of warfare, patient in his campaign, endlessly self-critical, and, above all, an enemy who has shown that he is willing to pay the price for what he wants.

The Crucial Question

For that is the crucial question: Will the price be paid? Despite all the American aid, this is not yet at least, an American war. It is a Vietnamese war, and it remains for the Saigon Government to show that it will pay the price.

Recently, a high Government official was talking with reporters along this line. The subject was how the Vietcong, lacking decent water for use in some medical treatments, was using cocoanut milk. "Yes," said the official, "but we don't have to. We have aid. It is all good aid, the very best in the world. It is so easy today to get all the aid you want. Perhaps we would be better off if we were like the Vietcong and had less aid."



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American Friends of Vietnam
4 West 40th Street
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