

SAIGON, August 22. The USOM building on a Saturday afternoon slows down after a morning of hectic end-of-the-week activity. Many of the personnel who have put in a thoroughly unAmerican 56-hour week are off at a "cercle sportif" putting in two or three hours on a tennis court under a blazing sun. But this afternoon, something of an air of business hung over the lobby at USOM. The young marine corporal on duty scrupulously checked credentials, sometimes asking for confirmation by examining passport photos. Suddenly he snapped to attention and saluted a genial youngish-looking man in a civilian suit who returned the salute with military precision. "Col. Wilson," said the corporal, "a Mr. Charles Collingwood of CBS, I believe he is a vice-president, is waiting for you, sir."

Col. Samuel Wilson, who is in charge of operations at USOM, is the most talked-of individual at USOM-Saigon. References to him always convey both admiration for his intellect and warmth for his personality. He is a solid-looking figure, light-haired, tall by ordinary American standards but not the towering figure that most American military men seem to be in Viet Nam.

Promptly at 2:30, as scheduled, Col. Wilson opened a conference of 19 American graduate students who had been working all summer in Viet Nam as assistants to USOM provincial representatives. Seated around a horse-shoe arrangement of tables, they all faced Col. Wilson who seemed to know a good number of them by name. There was a good deal of joking such as one would find in any group of students, but over it all a mood of solid seriousness. As spectators, a dozen of Col. Wilson's staff occupied a row of chairs; they were now the students, and their function was to learn from their juniors. In addition to myself, the only other outsider was Collingwood, looking strangely out of place in a dark suit -- complete with tie and jacket -- obviously feeling the heat.

Col. Wilson began by explaining the purpose of the conference: to hear the comments, criticisms and suggestions of the students. To set the stage, he described the origins of the student project, the resistance in Washington based in part on fear of what Congress would say if any of the students were injured and in part on the unorthodoxy of the venture, the approval of the program by Gen. Taylor who believed that American students should have an opportunity to see the Vietnamese reality up close. A number of universities had indicated that they wanted to adopt hamlets and establish direct ties. But the difficulties were too great. USOM's major problem is one of logistics. Though many volunteer organizations in America want to send aid directly, the transportation problem is often insuperable. But some kind of contact could be established through such a program as had now been carried out. Today's discussion would indicate whether it had been worthwhile.

But before hearing from each of the students, it would be ^{worthwhile} ~~worthwhile~~, said Col. Wilson, to look at the fundamental characteristics of the total situation. "What we have here in ~~militar~~ Viet Nam is a political struggle, primarily. It is a political struggle with violent military overtones, but it is basically political. The Viet Cong cannot win it militarily, but they can win it politically. That is why our efforts must be aimed at helping to develop a government that will be truly responsive to the needs of the Vietnamese people."

Now there are several premises on which our policy is based:

1. "We believe that the revolution which is taking place in this country does not necessarily belong to the V-C. In our advisory capacity we can assist the rightful custodians of this revolution to gain possession of it." A great deal depends on your view of history. "I am inclined myself to agree with Tolstoy's view of human history. He says the figures ~~in history~~ who prove to be successful are those who somehow are

able to wind up on a faceless crest of history. It may be argued that the Roman soldier who got up at four o'clock in the morning to urinate and saw the gleaming armor of the advancing enemy and then roused the camp for a successful defense was responsible for the victory. That may explain one engagement. But the growth of the Roman empire and its role in history can be explained only on the basis of the fact that it moved in step with the social forces of the age.

2. "There is a basic social force in operation here in Vietnam. A revolution is under way -- a breaking away from the eighteenth century into the middle of the twentieth. A senior officer here was saying to me, "What can we do to create a more dynamic enthusiasm for the preservation of the status quo?" That reveals ~~is~~ a complete misunderstanding of the situation. In the first place, you can't preserve the status quo. In the second place, our job is not to preserve things as they are but to help the people move toward something better."

3. "A third premise: The war can be lost in Saigon, but it must be won in the countryside."

4. "Each province is different. There is no one Viet Nam. There are only separate provinces, no two of which are alike. Since ~~the~~ Viet Nam is the provinces, the province chief is the most important individual in Viet Nam. This flies in the face of the historical ~~local~~ French tradition of administration, which sought to centralize everything and prevent local autonomy.

5. "The most important U.S. people are the MACV representative and the USOM provincial representative. (Military Assistance Command Vietnam, which reports directly to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and thru it to the President of the U. S.) The principal objective is to make local government more effective."

The Viet Cong, he continued, poses three threats: (1) the use of main force battalions, which can be answered only by conventional military responses; (2) the political threat flowing from premise number three; and (3) the V-C political infrastructure that has consolidated vast areas in the countryside.

He attributed to Ambassador Lodge the statement that the VC can only offer promises since they are on the outside, but we who are on the inside are in a position to produce. (I have heard this statement from others in USOM. But ~~it is also put~~, as Col. Wilson seemed to suggest, ^{also} that this gives the VC an advantage: it is easier for the "outs" to promise than it is for the "ins" to produce.)

Col. Wilson then invited each of the 19 students to introduce themselves and give their reactions. (Each had already submitted a written report.) He called for complete candor, and kept prodding them constantly to be outspoken. The more critical the comments, the more he seemed to be relishing the report. Details and experiences came in a flood, and the most striking over-all feature was the sharp contrast as the discussion moved from province to province. In one place, the province chief was lazy; in another, he was extremely dynamic. In one place, the people respected him; in another, he was hated. In one province, security was almost perfect: you could go anywhere you wanted without much concern; in another, you could go almost anywhere with a military escort; in another, you could go down the road 5 clicks to the East and 3 clicks to the West, and that was all there was to the province so far as we were concerned.

There were some common denominators. As Allen Samson, a PHD student in political science at the Univ. of Calif., said, the main problem is to get the local people to ~~stand~~

identify with the local government. Actually, the peasant has no "ideological commitment" and is concerned solely with who can give him more security against physical attack. He had interviewed systematically, in a formal survey, 24 of the Viet Cong defectors who had come in as ~~xxxxxxx~~ "rallyers" in the Chieu Hoy (Open-arms) program; only 2 of them had ever known the name of the province chief.

A young Hawaiian named Kanoka, now at the American University in Washington, was convinced that the USOM program in his province was a terrific success but that the Psy War (psychological warfare) program had to be stepped up. A young Negro graduate student at Howard University had mixed feelings about what he had seen. A New Jerseyite at Seaton Hall believed that the USOM self-help programs were being eminently successful; in his province, funds had been allocated to build 30 schools; by careful management, the people had stretched the money to build 60 schools. More attention must be given to teacher-training programs to advance the level of qualifications of the teachers, but at this stage of the game, anything that was being done represented considerable progress. (School building seems to have been among the major successes in the pacified provinces. Thousands of schools apparently have been constructed. But there were some criticisms, too: "I've leaned against the wall of a school and nearly brought the building down." "Sometimes the ~~xxxxxxx~~ cement blocks are only a quarter of an inch thin.")

The students were knowledgeable people, many of them majoring in far Eastern problems, thoroughly familiar with activities in other countries which they could use for comparative purposes. The question of land reform kept cropping up. "When we were briefed in Washington we were told that land reform is no problem here. That was wrong." A chorus from seemingly all 19 indicated that ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ on this there was unanimity. One student taking his Ph.D. at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy who seemed older than the others (in his early thirties) suggested that some of the local landlords ought to be sent to Taiwan to see how land reform had worked there; apparently landlords who were parted from their land now put their capital in industrialization and have grown rich, according to this student's observations in Taiwan. Wilson indicated that he shared the view that land reform is important and that Taiwan's experience was valuable.

There were frequent references to the Chieu Hoy program, most of them treating it as a joke. "It's a mastering out program for VC washouts," said one student amidst much laughter. "Only the dregs of the VC seem to defect; they seem to be people of low intelligence." But another (the same student who had referred to Taiwan's land reform program) said: "The Chieu Hoy program is no great success, but it's not as bad as some of you have made out. I've seen a good number who are worth having. Of course we don't get the hard-core VC. These are generally people who have been impressed or drafted into the VC, and some of them are of high caliber." Someone pointed out that the Chieu Hoy program, which is modeled after the Phillipine program used with the Huks, was not working well because in an important respect it did not follow the Phillipine program: there land was offered to the returners. In Viet Nam, the problem is that the defectors cannot return to their hamlets where they would most certainly be assassinated by the VC. They must be given jobs and resettled elsewhere.

Concern was expressed over the behavior of American troops. In Da Nang, some of the boys had themselves a little fun by throwing fully clothed women into the river. But the Mayor of Da Nang whom everybody considers top-notch (I mention him elsewhere in my notes) got together with our officers and things are under control. There is agreement that the behavior of the individual men is a direct reflection of the

attitude of their officers. An even more serious problem, though, is the military behavior of the ~~ARMY~~ ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) which is quick to attack a village on suspicion that it is VC. One student cited a situation in which unobserved artillery fire was used; "if the people weren't VC before, they are now." "That's what we call 'counter-productive activity'," said Col. Wilson.

There are hard military and organizational problems involved in this kind of situation. Civic action groups are maintained by our military to help the people, to repair war damage that we may have caused, to improve civilian life; this overlaps with USOM activity and causes administrative snarls. (But it is probably better to have duplication, waste and bureaucratic frictions than not to have the job done at all.) One student cited a conversation with an officer who was afraid that by making his men conscious of the population's needs some of the fighting spirit of his men might be watered down.

Perhaps the most useful aspect of the conference was its effect in helping the students put their own experience into perspective. Viet Nam is an enormously complicated mosaic, and ~~XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX~~ there is a temptation to believe that the tile under your nose is the whole picture. It was possible in the meaty three-hour session to see the wide range of differences, as between the pacified province and the place where "we're just trying to keep the patient alive on the operating table." A number of the students indicated that they had come with the prejudices engendered by the tea ch-ins, but they felt now that the story was not being told back home. There was criticism of the American press, references to stories that were written by men who had not been on the scene and gotten the facts at third and fourth hand, who find drama in the things that were wrong and had little interest in the things that are right. "I don't think I'll ever believe the American press again." "My province was completely in the hands of the VC; I know that because I read it in Time; still I was able to go anywhere without any concern."

Yet the press is not dishonest. Nor is it even inaccurate. It presents facts, but facts are not the truth; at best they are only partial truths, and partial truths are the best building materials for the giant lie. Unfortunately, everything said about Vietnam is true. All the disparities and contradictions are equally true. One can wrestle with this prickly bag of disjointed partial truths and never reconcile the facts. The only way we can approach it is with the tongs of purpose. One tong is the goal of human freedom; the other is the elevation of the standard of living. If we can keep resolutely to our purposes, we may yet be able to extricate ourselves from Viet Nam and leave the country in the hands of the people, "the rightful custodian of the Vietnamese revolution," as Col. Wilson describes them.

MISCELLANEOUS. One student who was injured: "I can report only on 10 days observations in the field; but I could report at length on the nurses in the X Field Hospital.".... ~~When~~ Col. Wilson mentioned that he was an officer in the Special Forces "secunda-ed" as the British say, to USOM. Later one student said, "I'm especially grateful to Special Forces; they saved my life this summer.".... A Berkeley student: "I brought my university registration along; I figured if the VC caught me, that would be my ticket to freedom."