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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

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SUBJECT: NIE 53-62: PROSPECTS IN SOUTH VIETNAM (Draft for Board/Panel Consideration)

THE PROBLEM

To assess the situation and prospects in South Vietnam, with special emphasis upon the military and political factors most likely to affect the counterinsurgency effort.

CONCLUSIONS

(To follow)

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DISCUSSION

Introduction

1. The present conflict in South Vietnam is a complex amalgam of a purely Vietnamese civil war with dynastic overtones, a test-case competition of antithetical ideologies, and an active theater of operations in the global struggle between the Free World and the Communist Bloc. The conflict is many-faceted. In it, military operations have played and will continue to play an important role; but in essence it is a political struggle in which military activity is but one technique employed. For either side, military success will be a necessary but not a sufficient condition of victory.

2. This conflict involves five principal protagonists -- the Communist "Democratic Republic of Vietnam" (DRV), the USSR, Communist China (the CPR), the Government of Vietnam (GVN), and the United States -- each of whom has a considerable strategic and political stake in its outcome, each of whom is using the conflict to demonstrate the viability or "correctness" of certain political programs, and no two of whom have identical interests or objectives in South Vietnam.

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3. On the Communist side, the primary concern of the regime which now rules North Vietnam (the DRV) is to secure political control over all of Vietnam, along with de facto suzerainty over at least those portions of Laos contiguous with Vietnam's borders and, eventually, a sphere of influence in Cambodia as well -- i.e., to reap what it probably considers the still ungarnered fruits of its 1954 victory over the French. In pursuit of this objective, the DRV will expect and welcome assistance from other members of the Bloc, principally the USSR and CPR. The DRV would not be unduly perturbed about taking militant action which might engender crises elsewhere in the world, but seems well aware of North Vietnam's own vulnerability, particularly to air strikes, even conventional ones. Consequently, the DRV is probably anxious to avoid an escalation of the war in South Vietnam which would bring it into a direct confrontation with US forces and entail the risk of North Vietnam's receiving blows similar to those suffered by North Korea during the Korean conflict. Furthermore, we doubt if the DRV would wish to purchase victory at the price of becoming an outright vassal of the CPR or, indeed, if it would wish to see its territory traversed by Chinese troops easier to invite in than to invite out.

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4. The CPR is in sympathy with the DRV's ambitions, but would like to see them realized under Chinese tutelage and direction, in part to enhance the CPR's prestige and in part because one of the CPR's own long-term objectives is to establish an effectively controlled satellite on China's southern maritime border. The CPR is unquestionably anxious to eliminate the US presence in South Vietnam; though it is probably not displeased at the present extent of US involvement in the Vietnamese conflict, since a DRV victory would now be a serious political defeat for the United States. The Indochinese peninsula is an area of vital strategic concern to the CPR and one in which it can easily display a militancy pointedly contrasting with Soviet caution. We believe that the CPR, though not anxious for total war, would probably take a more sanguine view of the risks of escalation which militancy in South Vietnam might entail than the USSR or, in fact, the DRV.

5. The USSR is certainly sympathetic to the DRV's ambitions, and would welcome the strategic and political reverse which achievement of the DRV's goals would inflict on the United States. To the USSR, however, South Vietnam is but one front, albeit an important one, in the global Communist struggle against the

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capitalist world and, in particular, against the United States as the leader thereof. Furthermore, from a strategic and territorial point of view, no vital interests of the USSR itself are directly at stake in Southeast Asia. The USSR would have little reason to be dissatisfied with the present extent of US entanglement in South Vietnam, with the drain on US morale and resources a protracted struggle there would produce, or with the continual irritants such a struggle would occasion between the US and its principal Free World allies. So long as the DRV suffers no major reverses in SVN -- perhaps even so long as the territorial integrity of North Vietnam itself is not threatened -- the USSR would probably not wish to countenance any DRV moves which would entail the risk of escalating the level of the conflict in Vietnam or of a direct military confrontation between itself and the United States. The range of policy alternatives open to the USSR, however, is narrowed by the fact that it cannot risk seeming appreciably less zealous than the Chinese in advancing the Communist cause. Furthermore, for a variety of reasons, most of Hanoi's key figures (including Ho Chi Minh and Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap) seem to be more pro-Soviet than pro-Chinese. To keep things this way, the USSR must provide the DRV with a measure of encouragement and support

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which could entail running risks of US reaction the USSR might otherwise prefer not to incur.

6. The three Communist protagonists seem to be presently agreed on pursuing the struggle for Communist control over South Vietnam as a "war of national liberation" directed by the DRV with USSR and CPR advice and support. Barring a radical change in the local or international situation, it appears that the DRV intends to rely on subversion, guerilla warfare and united-front tactics, using as its principal instruments an insurgent force in South Vietnam known as the Viet Cong (VC) and an ostensibly indigenous "National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam" (NFLSV), in whose cause VC forces now usually claim to be fighting. Both the VC and the NFLSV are controlled creations of Hanoi. There is no indication that the DRV is now contemplating a Korean-type invasion across the 17th parallel with its regular troops (the PAVN). Instead, present evidence suggests that it intends to wage the military aspects of its campaign entirely with forces inside South Vietnam -- i.e., the VC or VC-dominated "National Liberation Army" -- using the PAVN only as a latent threat against which the GVN must constantly deploy some of its own forces. However, the DRV will continue to infiltrate PAVN personnel into South Vietnam

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to serve as cadre and leaders of the VC. It also may begin (and may have already begun) to infiltrate individual PAVN units into SVN to fight as VC troops.

7. The DRV appears prepared to undertake whatever degree of subversive activity in South Vietnam it finds necessary to attain its objectives, subject to the limitations imposed, on the one hand by US/GVN counter-measures and, on the other, by the level of Bloc aid made available to Hanoi, by the North Vietnamese economy, and by the need to minimize the risks of escalation (a need concerning which the three Communist protagonists are probably in general accord, though they probably differ over what minimal risks of escalation are acceptable). The increase of US presence in South Vietnam and recent events in Laos have probably influenced the DRV's tactical planning and its flexible timetable, but we doubt if they have materially affected overall Communist strategy or objectives in South Vietnam.

8. On the anti-Communist side, the extent of US involvement in South Vietnam and the level of US aid to the GVN have reached the point where the struggle against the Viet Cong in South Vietnam has become a joint US/GVN effort. The US and the GVN, however, do not have identical interests or objectives.

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9. The principal objective of the US effort in South Vietnam is to prevent the Communists from acquiring control over its people and territory. For the foreseeable future, the present GVN is the instrument with which and through which the US will have to work. US interests, however, require only that there be a free, non-Communist and effective government in South Vietnam. The US has no vested stake in the political fortunes of the Ngo family.

10. The present GVN is, in a sense, but an extension of the personality of its President, Ngo Dinh Diem. Diem is a dedicated anti-Communist patriot. He is also the proud descendent of a family long prominent in Annamite court circles. He is also a person steeped in and molded by the traditions and concepts of the classical Vietnamese mandarin. Though his government bears the outward form of a modern parliamentary State, its functional organization bears strong resemblances to the Annamite Court and, in particular, the all-important Office of the Presidency is almost exactly patterned along the lines of the old Imperial Household. In effect, if not in name, when Diem deposed Bao Dai as Chief of State in 1955, the last Vietnamese ruler of the House of Nguyen was replaced by the first of the House of Ngo Dinh. Though Diem has unreservedly dedicated himself to and identified

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himself with the cause of Vietnamese independence, available evidence suggests that he has also identified the cause of Vietnamese independence with the political fortunes of himself and his family. The Viet Cong constitute by far the gravest immediate threat to the Diem regime. This is not the only, but is by no means the least, of the reasons why the GVN is now waging an unrelenting war against the VC. However, the present GVN would probably regard as Pyrrhic a victory over the VC achieved through policies or tactics which permitted the rise of serious non-Communist contenders for political primacy in South Vietnam. In that sense, for the present GVN the objective of defeating the Communists is ancillary to its primary objective of preserving and extending the control of the House of Ngo Dinh within Vietnam.

The Communist Threat to South Vietnam

11. The prospect of a North Vietnamese invasion across the 17th parallel has menaced the Republic of Vietnam since its inception in 1954; but the immediate Communist threat to South Vietnam derives from an insurgency campaign of subversion and armed insurrection being waged by the Hanoi-directed Viet Cong within South Vietnam itself.

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12. After the 1954 Geneva Conference which marked the end of its successful insurrection against the French, the Hanoi regime ostensibly withdrew all of its military forces from South Vietnam; but left behind certain selected cadre, weapons stocks, and a nucleic organizational apparatus which became the Viet Cong. In addition, the DRV carefully developed a pool of PAVN officer and enlisted personnel with Southern origins to be infiltrated as needed back into South Vietnam for service with the Viet Cong.

13. The Geneva Accords stipulated that Vietnam was to be peacefully reunified by nationwide elections to be held in June 1955. In the immediate post-Geneva period, Hanoi seems to have acted on the belief (for which there was ample apparent evidence) that without further effort on its part the nascent Republic of Viet-Nam would collapse and the DRV would secure internationally sanctioned control of South Vietnam at the forthcoming elections. Observers in Hanoi, as elsewhere, underestimated Ngo Dinh Diem's toughness, skill, and capacity for political survival. When Diem weathered the sect crisis in the Spring of 1955, deposed Bao Dai as Chief of State and successfully ignored the election deadline; it became obvious that although the Republic of Vietnam was beset with numerous internal problems, they alone would not occasion its

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collapse. To check GVN progress and exacerbate its internal difficulties, Hanoi activated the Viet Cong apparatus and used it to launch a systematic, though, limited, campaign of terrorism, harassment and subversion. By 1959, the Viet Cong constituted a relatively small but nonetheless effective military-political force spotted throughout South Vietnam but confining the bulk of its operations to the Mekong Delta provinces. In about mid-1959, the DRV seems to have decided to step up the pace of its activities in South Vietnam and embark on an all-out "war of national liberation" -- a strategy endorsed by the Third National Congress of the Lao Dong (Communist) Party in Hanoi in September 1960 and also by the all-party conference held in Moscow soon thereafter. The size of VC forces together with the scale, intensity, and extent of their activities began to increase appreciably during the latter part of 1959 and began taking quantum jumps in the spring of 1960. (Despite an apparently increasing casualty rate, available evidence indicates that the size of VC "hard core" forces in South Vietnam more than quintupled between the spring of 1960 and the fall of 1962.)

14. On-the-ground direction of the VC insurgency campaign in South Vietnam seems to be vested in two bodies -- the Nambo Regional Committee and the Interzone (often called Intersector)V Regional

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Committee¹ -- each apparently independent, equal in status, and responsible directly to Hanoi. The Nambo Regional Committee appears to be responsible for all VC operations in the southern provinces (or, roughly, the former Cochinchina area), while the Interzone V Committee apparently directs all operations in the central and northern provinces of South Vietnam. (See Map No. 1)² Each regional committee has several staffs responsible for military and political activities; and the organization of the two regional committees appears to be duplicated among intermediate and lower level committees responsible for operations at the "inter-provincial," provincial, district, and village levels. Information on the political component of the VC apparatus is

¹ "Nambo" and "Interzone V" are terminological legacies from the days when the Viet Minh divided all of Vietnam into three regional commands ("bo"), viz. the Northern Region ("Bac Bo"), Central Region ("Trung Bo") and Southern Region ("Nam Bo"). Each region, in turn, was subdivided into numbered "zones" and "interzones."

² Recent reports suggest that Hanoi may be subdividing Interzone V into two separate regional commands, but this is not yet established. It also appears that VC intelligence gathering and paramilitary operations conducted just south of the 17th parallel demarcation line may be directed by PAVN 4th Region Headquarters in Dong Hoi (NVN) rather than the Interzone V Committee.

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sketchy; but it seems evident that the structure provides for tight, centralized control of military, paramilitary, intelligence gathering, propaganda and subversive activities sufficient to insure that each complements the other and all are integrated into a well-coordinated insurgency campaign.

15. In the initial post-Geneva years, the DRV's public policy position was that the National Assembly in Hanoi constituted the sole rightful government for the whole of Vietnam. The mid- or late-1959 decision to step up the pace of insurgency in South Vietnam and shift to a "war of national liberation" strategy, however, dictated a change in political tactics. Consequently, in January 1961, Hanoi news media announced that a "National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam" (NFLSV) had been formed in South Vietnam. Ostensibly an indigenous, "all party" group of patriots banded together to fight for Vietnamese independence against "American-Diemist (My-Diem) oppression and tyranny," the NFLSV, with help from Hanoi and other members of the Bloc, immediately launched on a still-continuing round of diplomatic activity intended to give the Front some prestige and standing particularly in neutralist or "non-aligned" circles. (Letters of congratulation were sent from the Front to newly-independent African nations,

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Front representatives began turning up at Communist sponsored international gatherings such as the Helsinki Youth Festival and, in its most notable coup to date, a Front delegation to Djakarta was officially received by the Government of Indonesia.) In January 1962, a year after the "foundation" of the NFLSV, Hanoi news media announced that the "South Vietnamese Peoples Revolutionary Party" had recently been formed, an "indigenous" Marxist-Leninist party which had associated itself with the NFLSV and, in fact, placed itself "in the vanguard" (i.e., assumed control of) the Front's activities. Since the founding of the NFLSV, Hanoi has taken the public line that although it sympathizes with the Front's "just" cause, the conflict in SVN is a purely internal affair in which the DRV plays no role whatsoever. Hanoi's apparent object in creating the NFLSV (an obvious reincarnation of the old "Lien Viet" front adapted to contemporary circumstances) has been to develop a political cut-out mechanism through which it can wage war in South Vietnam without openly implicating the DRV itself in aggressive activity or violation of the Geneva Accords. Though VC forces now generally claim to be fighting in the name of the NFLSV, in point of fact Front activities in any given area of South Vietnam are almost certainly controlled by the VC administrative unit responsible for that area, and not vice-versa.

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16. It is believed that within South Vietnam there are now between 22,000 and 24,000 regular (e.g., full-time) Viet Cong military personnel now organized into identifiable units.¹ These accepted units (25 battalions, 125 separate companies, and 111 separate platoons) are classified in three categories: inter-provincial, provincial, and district (the classification being based on the zone of operation of each unit and the level of the command which controls it). These forces are well-trained, well-disciplined, well-led, and, generally, well-armed with automatic weapons, light-machine guns, bazookas, and 57mm recoilless rifles.² Both officer and enlisted cadre of VC regular units are frequently experienced PAVN personnel of South Vietnamese origin infiltrated from North Vietnam. Generally speaking, interprovincial level forces are the most effective; since they constitute the elite troops who receive the best available equipment, food and training.

¹ This estimated figure is based upon the most recent available MACV studies (October 1962) and stands in significant contrast to the 4,000 Viet Cong regular force figure of April 1960. This estimate may well be conservative; for MACV's figures are based on rigid criteria of positive identification and independent verification.

² To date, VC forces are not known to have artillery or specifically anti-aircraft weapons; though in recent weeks, VC forces

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have become markedly more adept in using small arms and light automatic weapons against both fixed wing and, especially, rotary GVN or US aircraft. As yet, Communist aircraft have not been used in support of VC military operations in South Vietnam. The DRV does not itself have either fighters or bombers; though this is probably due less to the fact that the Geneva Accords prohibit the acquisition of such aircraft than to a Bloc judgment that the course of the conflict in South Vietnam does not, at this juncture, require the introduction of these aircraft types into the DRV inventory. The DRV does have 21 primary trainers (belonging to the Aero Sports Club at Haiphong Cat Bi airfield) which could be utilized for reconnaissance or spotting; but there is no indication that they have yet been so used. Though the DRV has no military air transport as such, its civil air fleet could be used in support of VC operations. If so used, the present DRV civil fleet would have a total lift capacity of about 40 tons. In sustained operations approximately 15 tons of cargo could be airdropped daily or 20 tons airlanded. Troop lift capacity would be about 450 men. DRV personnel have had considerable experience (and success) in supporting the Pathet Lao in Laos and hence would not find it difficult to fly similar missions in support of the Viet Cong. As SVN tactical air comes to play an increasingly significant role in interdicting VC activity, the Communists may find irresistible the temptation to inject some of their own air resources into the conflict.

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All VC regular units, however, are capable of giving a good account of themselves in combat; though provincial and district level forces often lack heavy weapons and must sometimes adjust their tactics accordingly.

17. The regular or "Main Force" Viet Cong units are supported by an additional 100,000 odd lightly armed, semi-trained local guerillas and self-defense forces. The former normally operate under district committees but are often used on operations with regular units as the first, or shock, wave of an attack. If the successful, Main Force troops follow on to finish the job. If the locals are repelled, Main Force units are not committed. Their integrity, morale, and reputation are thus preserved and serious losses of valuable equipment or trained personnel are avoided. The self-defense forces are charged with protecting Viet Cong areas when other units are absent. Self-defense units constitute a training and replacement pool for the local guerilla forces which, in turn, perform the same function for the regular forces. Virtually all VC regulars, therefore, are battle-experienced and battle-proven.

18. The strength and composition of VC tactical units varies widely from area to area depending on the local manpower situation, extent of governmental control or nature of government forces

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temporarily in the region, the availability of weapons and cadre personnel, and local operating conditions. However, throughout South Vietnam, VC forces have proved themselves adept masters of the classic guerilla tactics of surprise, constant movement, concentration for attack, and dispersal upon withdrawal. Though they rely primarily on small-unit actions, the VC have also shown themselves able to carry out company-size attacks against army and security units and the capability to strike simultaneously in battalion force against several widely dispersed targets. (To date, there is no hard evidence that the VC have formed or used units of larger than battalion size.) Their tactical intelligence seems excellent and their apparent foreknowledge of major GVN military force movements or operations is often employed to devastating advantage. In spite of severe and apparently mounting losses, the VC continue to show an unabated regenerative capability and continue to strike effectively in all parts of the country.

19. VC military activity -- from solitary ambush to quasi-conventional operation -- plays an important but carefully controlled role in what is essentially a campaign of political subversion. Extensive use is made of complimentary techniques

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such as propaganda, psychological warfare, and intelligence collection. Whether the target under attack be an isolated outpost of the GVN itself, the VC make every effort to weaken the enemy's will, penetrate his ranks, and bore from within before attacking from without.

20. At the present time, the VC are concentrating their efforts on acquiring control of the South Vietnamese countryside, apparently following Mao's theory that once an insurgent force acquires control of the countryside, the cities will fall of themselves. The VC have not neglected urban area; but available evidence suggests that their main present interests lie outside the cities. In the country, the VC are primarily concerned with obtaining the obedience, support and, where possible, the active loyalty of the rural population rather than with seizing or attempting to hold specific plots of territory. Even in their War Zones and Base Areas the VC seldom attempt to defend the ground itself against the entry of overwhelmingly superior GVN forces. Instead, they withdraw and disperse; only to reassemble and resume activity when the superior Government forces have departed.

21. In their political action campaign among the Vietnamese peasantry, the VC are seeking willing supporters more than cowed

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subjects. Needed supplies, for example, are seized if necessary; but where possible they are bought at fair prices. Terror and coercion are extensively employed but selectively used to promote the idea that the VC forces are the protectors and avengers of the poor peasantry as well as the idea that swift retribution awaits all who betray or fail to cooperate with the VC cause.

The VC take full advantage of the fact that the average Vietnamese peasant's horizons are bounded by his village, his neighbors, his relatives and his ancestors. VC forces and personnel up to district level generally operate in their native areas. Even cadre infiltrated from North Vietnam are usually of South Vietnamese origin and, where possible, are assigned to at least their native provinces. As a matter of policy, single personnel are encouraged to marry local girls; for under rural Vietnamese mores, no ties or obligations are so strong as those imposed by family kinship. (Even if the husband himself is subsequently transferred elsewhere, "friends" asking in his name have a claim on the services or support of his wife's relatives.) In short, VC forces make every effort to identify themselves with the rural population, and vice versa.

22. The VC insurgency campaign is virtually self-sustaining. For weapons, ammunition, and related military supplies, VC forces

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rely primarily on stocks captured from GVN forces, supplemented by the improvised output of clandestine "factories" in VC base areas. For food, shelter, concealment, tactical intelligence, and replacements, VC forces rely on the rural population of South Vietnam. Senior leaders, cadre and various kinds of technicians are infiltrated from North Vietnam and such personnel do not come south empty-handed. To date, however, the DRV's logistical support of the VC effort has been minimal and confined largely to heavier ordnance items, communications equipment, and other materiel not readily available by capture from small GVN units. Probably for cover reasons, most of the limited amount of equipment provided by the DRV has been of a type that could have been obtained in South Vietnam, although GVN forces have captured some VC ordnance adapted to use Bloc ammunition and, recently, have captured mortar shells with fuses of possible Soviet origin. This basically autochthonous character of the VC insurgent force is its greatest present strength and greatest potential weakness. In Mao's metaphor, without their hospitable peasant sea, the insurgent fish could not survive. If the GVN were ever able to rupture the present reciprocal identification between the Viet Cong and the bulk of South Vietnam's peasant population, the VC insurgency campaign would soon collapse.

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23. The Role of Laos and Cambodia. There is considerable evidence that senior officers, cadre and technicians are being infiltrated into South Vietnam from North Vietnam on a fairly regular basis via established routes traversing Laos and, to a lesser extent, Cambodia.* There is some evidence that areas in Cambodia near the South Vietnamese border have been used by the VC as safe havens or training areas; and there are grounds for suspecting that the Nambo Regional Committee may at one time have been physically located in Cambodia. The present importance to the VC of Cambodia and the so-called "Laotian Corridor," however, is easily exaggerated. The total number of cadre and other personnel infiltrated overland to date has been relatively small, and though some recent groups of infiltrators may have totaled as many as 200-400 people, the infiltrators themselves have generally been sent South as individuals rather than members of organized units moving in a body. Consequently, of the VC personnel in South Vietnam today who came by the overland route, there are very few who could not have been sent South by sea. To this extent, the fact that those portions of Southern Laos here

* See Map Number 2.

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involved now happen to be under the effective control of Communist forces is a convenience for the DRV, but little more. Even if they were under control of neutralist or FAR forces or, for that matter, even if they were open to such inspection as the ICC is ever likely to exercise, the DRV would have little difficulty in continuing to use the Corridor to the extent that it is presently doing so and the VC would not necessarily be seriously hurt if DRV use of the Corridor were curtailed. However, should the VC step up the scale of its military activity to the point where it is regularly attacking in regimental or larger formations, with a concomitant need for additional supplies and, especially, heavy weapons support, or should the war in South Vietnam reach the point where the DRV considers it desirable to infiltrate organized units into South Vietnam, then the Corridor could become extremely important and control of it would probably be considered essential by the DRV. Communist forces, therefore, would probably react strongly to any attempt to diminish their present control over the Corridor area, but more because of its possible future utility than its present importance to the VC campaign.

24. The intensive VC drive to acquire control of the South Vietnamese countryside has had a considerable measure of success.

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Recent MACV statistics indicate that (as of 1 October 1962) only about half of South Vietnam's rural population lives in what may be said to be GVN-controlled villages. Most of these villages are located in the environs of major towns, provincial capitals, and in the more heavily populated areas along main lines of communication. Though controlled by the GVN they are not likely to be lacking in VC sympathizers. The VC themselves control about 20 percent of South Vietnam's 2,500-odd villages. These villages contain only about nine percent of the rural population, but in aggregate areas they cover a significant portion of the countryside.* The remaining 47 percent of South Vietnam's villages, containing about 44 percent of the rural population, are not effectively controlled by either the GVN or the VC. Some significant proportion of their inhabitants must be sympathetic to the Viet Cong. There are signs that recent GVN counterinsurgency efforts have reduced the rate at which the VC were acquiring control over additional elements of the rural population, but there is no evidence that the GVN has yet succeeded in eradicating VC control from areas in which it has once become established.

* See Map Number 2.

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25. The pace of VC progress in the strictly military sphere also seems to have slowed. There is evidence to suggest that the VC, following Giap's doctrine, had hoped by now to be able to move from guerrilla warfare to mobile warfare involving the use of large, quasi-conventional forces. This has not occurred. In fact, between mid-July and mid-October 1962 there were no VC battalion-size attacks in South Vietnam -- though two such attacks did occur within ten days of each other in late October and early November. Claimed VC losses in military operations have been severe and, apparently, increasing. VC casualty estimates, however, are largely based on GVN intelligence reports which must be treated with extreme caution in light of the proclivity of GVN unit commanders for inflating VC loss figures and, especially, for counting every dead, non-uniformed Vietnamese in a battle area as a KIA Viet Cong. Recent information suggests that in some areas the VC may be suffering shortages of medicine, food and, possibly, ammunition. However, there has been no significant increase in VC desertion or defection figures, which remain negligible, no hard evidence of lessening morale, and no evidence of any diminished ability on the part of the VC to strike effectively throughout South Vietnam at times and places of their own choosing.

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26. Probable Viet Cong Intentions. We believe that over the next few months the Viet Cong will continue to maintain constant harassing pressure on GVN forces occasionally utilizing company or battalion-size formations, especially against targets of opportunity, but relying primarily on widespread small-unit actions against targets selected for maximum political and psychological effect. A major aim of this VC activity will be to demonstrate to the Vietnamese people (particularly those in rural areas), the GVN security forces, the world at large -- and, indeed, to their own troops -- that VC forces have not been seriously hurt by the recent upsurge of GVN military aggressiveness or the new techniques now being employed by the GVN security forces in conjunction with US advice and assistance. On the political side, primary VC attention will be devoted to increasing their political hold over the rural population. Special emphasis will be devoted to countering the effects of GVN military sweeps through VC dominated areas by publicly reasserting VC control as soon as superior GVN forces have departed, as, indeed, the VC have just done in the southernmost portion of the Canau peninsula. The VC will probably try to improve their urban apparatus and may attempt to step up the scale of terrorist activity in the major population centers, particularly Saigon/Cholon. In short, though there may be

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heightened activity in some localized areas, the overall VC effort in the near-term future will probably amount to the continued waging of a deliberately dull and wearing war of constant attrition designed to demoralize the South Vietnamese public and the GVN's security forces, to weaken GVN authority in the countryside with the intent of supplanting it wherever possible, and to discredit the effectiveness of the Diem regime. The VC will, of course, stand poised to capitalize on any unforeseen opportunity such as a non-Communist coup attempt's precipitating a temporary hiatus of authority which the VC could turn to their advantage.

27. Though we believe the VC are probably not contemplating any major military moves in the near-term future, certain indications tend to suggest a contrary thesis. There is some evidence that in the highland area of Central Vietnam, the VC are developing a command and support structure, with commensurate communications facilities, capable of directing coordinated activity by units of at least regimental size. If this is true, the VC may be contemplating a major move in the highlands. The most likely such move would be an effort to extend the range of VC control in the Do Xa area (the northernmost of the VC War Zones)* possibly by

* See Map Number 2.

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driving toward the Laotian border in an attempt to establish a belt of VC authority terminating in a controlled zone contiguous to the frontier through which organized units and heavy equipment could be funnelled into South Vietnam and by which the landward flank of South Vietnam's northern border would be turned and South Vietnam itself virtually cut in two. If the VC were to initiate such an operation, it would probably be launched with a series of sharp company or battalion-size attacks in the delta area designed to draw enough of the GVN security forces down toward the southern swamps so that the VC's real trap could be sprung in the northern mountains. This would, in effect, be the same strategy as that employed by the Viet Minh to win their war against the French: a war in which the bulk of the fighting was done in the delta, but the crucial, decisive battles -- Cao Bang, Lang Son and, especially, Dien bien Phu -- were won in the mountains.

29. Over the next few months, Hanoi and other members of the Bloc will doubtless continue their diplomatic propaganda support of the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam. The NFLSV, in turn, will probably issue manifestos, send more delegations to neutralist capitals, and engage in what activity it can to build its international image. However, we doubt if the VC itself plans to make any near-term use of the NFLSV,

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though VC forces will probably continue to claim to be fighting on the Front's behalf. Hanoi will probably give continued, but low-key, play to the propaganda theme of the desirability of a "neutral" South Vietnam and may send up a few trial balloons to test prevailing sentiments concerning an international conference to settle the "South Vietnamese problem." However, though there may be some difference of opinion between the DRV and the CPR on this point, we doubt if the Communist Party leadership in Hanoi -- or their senior subordinates actually directing the VC insurgency effort on the ground -- really want a conference on Vietnam at the present time. The Laotian parallel here can be dangerously misleading; for in Communist (or, at least, DRV) eyes, the situation in Vietnam would not now be "ripe" as was the situation in Laos in the summer of 1962. We doubt in fact if Hanoi will of its own volition seriously press for an international conference on, or neutralist solution in, South Vietnam until such time as the NFLSV has some reasonably secure real estate over which its flag can safely fly. This condition, in turn, will not be met until the VC forces in South Vietnam are able to provide the necessary territory by scoring some significant military success along the lines outlined above.

(text to be continued)

III. THE GVN RESPONSE

A. Background

30. In significant measure, the present gravity of the Communist threat to South Vietnam is attributable to past GVN errors, not all of which have yet been rectified. Since its inception, the GVN has been understandably fearful of a North Vietnamese invasion. To meet this implicit external threat, it initially adopted a defense posture ill-suited to cope with internal insurrection. The GVN leadership persisted in regarding the threat developing within South Vietnam as a menace largely created and supported by external forces with little appeal among the South Vietnamese population. It adamantly viewed the growing problem as an essentially military one whose solution required paramount emphasis on purely military measures. Even in the strictly military sphere, the effectiveness of the GVN's response to this threat was diminished by its leadership's reluctance to abandon static defense concepts and permit more offensive actions, for which it had ample forces, and, especially, by its excessive employment of various policies and control devices designed to protect the interests of the Ngo Dinh family, a goal which took evident precedence over that of defeating the Communists. In

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contrast to the rapid acceleration of the Communist insurgent and subversive effort, the GVN's response was gradual, relatively uncoordinated and, until this year, reflected little sense of urgency. Not until early 1961 was a comprehensive counterinsurgency plan drawn up, with the help of US officials, and several more months elapsed before much implementing action was taken. Not until early 1962 did the GVN begin to act as if its top leadership had acknowledged that the crisis situation in South Vietnam was primarily an internal and political problem which could not be solved unless military action were coordinated with political measures capable of eliminating Communist appeal, support and control among the peasants. Though senior GVN officials, including Ngo dinh Nhu, have begun paying lip service to the thesis that a government must serve as well as be served, the GVN seems loathe to face the implications of the fact that popular support is not something that can be expected or demanded as a matter of divine right but, instead, is something that must be actively sought and earned.

B. Military

31. Recent months have witnessed a marked increase in the size of GVN military forces and considerable improvement in their

[REDACTED]

effectiveness; both attributable, in large measure, to various forms of US assistance. * The tide of VC victories which mounted steadily during 1960 and 1961 seems to have been checked. GVN forces are undertaking an ever-increasing number of offensive operations. They are capable of entering/any area of South Vietnam and clearing it, at least temporarily, of VC forces; though not capable of keeping many areas free of VC domination. The latter, however, is a political more than a purely military task.

32. US materiel support, coupled with the training programs and tactical advice provided by US military personnel in South Vietnam (who now number almost 11,000) have considerably enhanced the counter-guerrilla capability of GVN military and security forces. Armed with weapons and equipment suited to counterinsurgency missions, these forces are now ambushing and patrolling more

* The GVN military establishment consists of three separate but related organizations: (1) the regular forces (RVNAF) with a present strength of 207,033 including the Army (189,544), Navy (5,876) and Air Force (6,464); (2) the Civil Guard (CG) with a strength of 75,815; and (3) the Self Defense Corps (SDC) with a strength of 95,399. The CG are internal security troops organized on a provincial basis. The SDC constitute a militia or "home guard" responsible for local security in the villages, hamlets and rural areas.

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than ever before, are engaging the VC increasingly in small-unit actions, and are following through their attacks in order to keep the VC from disengaging. The improved tactical mobility made possible by an increasing utilization of air power, principally US helicopter support, is being used to advantage; as, indeed, are all forms of air support.

32. Although their counter-guerrilla tactics have improved, GVN military forces continue to rely more on large operations or clearing sweeps than on small-unit actions, make excessive use of CG and SDC units in independent offensive missions, and, during large operations, deploy combat units, particularly artillery and air, according to conventional tactical methods as if the enemy constituted a conventional military force. As a result, CG and SDC units are incurring disproportionately heavy casualties. Furthermore, VC forces generally have advance knowledge of major GVN operations, particularly ones preceded by artillery or air bombardment, and are frequently able to disperse in time to avoid an unwanted engagement with superior forces. Though GVN sweeps are sometimes quite successful in capturing VC stores or shredding VC regular units, the results of many such operations are marginal when compared with the GVN effort expended. Furthermore, there is little evidence that even successful sweeps have

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any appreciable effect on VC domination of the areas traversed by GVN forces.

34. The political effectiveness of GVN military operations is often diminished by poor relationships between the GVN and the local peasantry. Efforts to convince GVN leaders of this have gone unheeded for years, though some individual commanders recognize the problem and are trying to correct it. By deliberate policy, GVN troops are usually not native to their areas of operation; VC forces, also by design, generally are. Consequently, even when there is no question of outright brutality or punitive action against persons unjustly considered collaborators, the ordinary peasant is going to look upon GVN troops as outsiders speaking in alien accents, whereas the local VC forces usually speak his dialect and frequently include his relatives or neighbors.

35. A major weakness in the GVN military effort, one partially responsible for ineffective sweeps or politically counterproductive punishment of innocent persons, is the lack of reliable, timely intelligence on the VC. Better communications, particularly the installation of radios in most villages, have

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improved matters somewhat and facilitated quick response to sighted VC concentrations or actual attacks; but GVN military planning at all levels continues to be hampered by inadequate intelligence support. A shortage of trained personnel is partially responsible for this problem, as is the lack of orderly collection, evaluation, and dissemination techniques. Its principal causes, however, lie in the overlapping responsibilities and jurisdictional rivalries of the GVN's multifarious intelligence agencies, coupled with the fact that each of these agencies devotes considerable effort, not to the VC, but to squelching non-Communist opponents of the Diem regime and protecting various leaders from their bureaucratic rivals. In response to US pressure, the GVN has created a Central Intelligence Organization (CIO) to improve some of the defects in its anti-VC intelligence effort. Recent evidence suggests, however, that the CIO has been quietly emasculated and is unlikely to become anything but a facade kept up to please the Americans.

36. In political terms, the GVN's most important military task is that of providing constant and adequate protection from VC incursions at the village and hamlet level. The provision of such security, together with static defense of transportation routes and civil installations, is the primary responsibility of

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the CG and SDC; but in the past these organizations have been unable to discharge these functions with any measure of success. To rectify this situation, virtually all CG units have now been retrained and provided with modern arms and equipment under an intensive, US-aided program begun in January 1961. A similar program for the SDC is also well under way. In addition, the GVN, again with US assistance, has sponsored or aided a heterogeneous variety of paramilitary organizations referred to collectively as Citizens Irregular Defense Groups (CIDG), about 22,000 of whom have now been trained and armed. The CIDG program is an important development since it provides a vehicle whereby at least some Vietnamese private citizens can identify themselves directly with the GVN counterinsurgency effort and take a hand in their own defense. In spite of the encouraging success of these various programs, however, large numbers of RVNAF personnel remain tied to local security and static defense missions. The GVN will not have achieved a really significant improvement in its military position vis-a-vis the VC until the CG and SDC, supplemented by armed private citizens, can maintain local security with only modest and occasional assistance from the regular troops.

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37. The effectiveness of all categories of GVN counter-insurgency forces, as well as their relative degree of susceptibility to VC subversion or psychological warfare blandishments, is and will continue to be significantly influenced by these forces' morale and general attitude toward the struggle in which they are engaged. There are indications that the heightened level of US presence and support, the somewhat greater role now being played by GVN military professionals in formulating and directing military operations, and the record of recent successes against the VC have improved morale among members of the middle and upper echelons of the GVN military establishment. Other reports suggest, however, that a number of officers, at all levels, are discouraged by the overall progress of the war and have little faith in the Diem regime's ability to lead the country to victory. Morale of the lower ranks is more difficult to determine; the desertion rate of GVN forces is extremely high and not decreasing -- though it is highest among recruits, recalled reservists, and SDC units, which do the least glamorous fighting and suffer the heaviest casualties. During the first seven months of 1962, 17,827 combat personnel were reported dropped from GVN military force rosters as deserters or unreturned AWOLS. (VC desertions during this same period totalled 791.)

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38. There is considerable evidence that both Diem and his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu have little faith in the professional competence of the senior members of the GVN military establishment and, for understandable reasons, entertain grave doubts about the loyalty of the officer corps. As a result, they try to maintain a detailed control of GVN military activity which frequently exceeds their administrative ability, to the detriment of GVN military operations. Also, the numerous devices employed to monitor the political loyalty of the military forces and eliminate any political risk to the regime posed by possible dissidents therein do little to enhance the effectiveness of the GVN military establishment as an instrument for fighting the VC.

B. Political

39. Background. For several crucial years, the GVN's political response to the growing Communist threat was ineffective and uncoordinated, largely as a result of the GVN's reluctance to acknowledge that the threat was basically political and had to be met by political action in which military operations played a vital but essentially subordinate role. However, in response to persistent US pressure, the GVN finally devised a basic strategic plan

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which takes cognizance of the political nature of the struggle and provides a framework for the coordinated implementation of the GVN's various counterinsurgency programs. The two key elements of this plan are the strategic hamlet program and the concept of a large-scale but well-integrated military/political operation designed to isolate the VC and regain control of the countryside on a systematic, area-by-area basis.

40. The Strategic Hamlet Program has become the major vehicle of the GVN counterinsurgency effort. In essence, it involves regrouping the rural population into fortified and defensible settlements and within these settlements initiating political, social and economic programs designed to weed out VC sympathizers or agents, provide effective local government, improve the general popular image of the GVN and increase the peasantry's identification with the GVN's fight against the VC. As of mid-October 1962, according to GVN figures, more than 3,000 strategic hamlets had been completed and another 2,000 plus were under construction.* The program has many meritorious features and there is considerable

* See Map Number 2.

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evidence that both the VC and Hanoi view these hamlets as potential threats of considerable magnitude. The hamlets constructed to date, however, vary widely in the effectiveness of their external fortifications and the zeal with which enlightened political action programs are being pursued within their confines. Excessive financial levies on their inhabitants or use of forced labor in their construction may have made some hamlets politically counterproductive. Though the program appears to have been fairly successful in some areas, it is still too early for an overall evaluation. Some of its sound features, however, are being negated in an attempt to implement it too rapidly. Certain GVN leaders, including President Diem and Ngo Dinh Nhu, tend to place an exaggerated importance on the program, viewing it as a quick panacea to the Communist insurgency problem rather than one more measure for cutting off the VC from the peasantry. As a result, the strategic hamlet program has not been effectively integrated with the basic military-political effort to eliminate VC control gradually but systematically.

41. Major Pacification Operations. To date, the GVN has initiated four integrated pacification operations of the type provided for in its overall strategic plan and has made preparations

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to launch a fifth in the near future.* The results of this operational approach are encouraging but its limited application to relatively few provinces has not yet appreciably altered the balance between the government and the VC in the countryside. Moreover, there are signs that the GVN is having second thoughts about the feasibility of such operations as a major element of its counterinsurgency effort and is contemplating putting renewed reliance on more strictly military operations. We believe that such a shift in program, if adopted, would prove disastrous for the GVN.

42. The success of some specific counterinsurgency projects has done little to improve the GVN's provincial administration, which remains a basic political weakness and prime cause of the rural population's lack of identification with the GVN cause. With some notable exceptions, the calibre of provincial officials is poor, promotion and preferment is based on loyalty to the regime rather than efficiency or demonstrated competence in promoting the welfare of those over whom authority is exercised. Various

* See Map Number 2.

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forms of minor corruption are rife and seldom disciplined by higher governmental echelons. The actual implementation of GVN programs intended to improve the lot of the poorer peasantry is often inept or politically counter-productive. The land reform program, announced as completed, has in fact been quietly scuttled. Significant diminution of VC political appeal in rural areas is unlikely to occur until GVN provincial administration is drastically reformed and the calibre of individual administrators markedly improved.

43. In pursuing its various counterinsurgency programs, the GVN has paid relatively little attention to urban areas. It has made no concessions at all to the aspirations or sensibilities of those non-Communist Vietnamese with Western-oriented educations who chafe at its limitations of free expression and curtailment of civil liberties. In consequence, the GVN continues to deny itself the services of many whose administrative or technical qualifications it urgently needs.

44. On balance, the GVN's political response to the VC threat has been much less effective than its military response. Certain programs have had encouraging results and there are some indications that support for Diem and his government in the

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countryside may be growing, particularly in areas where security has improved and the government's military power is increasing. However, social and economic advances are not keeping pace with military successes and positive identification of the peasantry with the government is still a long way off. Though aware of its need to improve its political standing among its own people, the GVN seems loathe to change any of the political modus operandi responsible for its unflattering image and lack of political support.

IV. ECONOMIC FACTORS

45. Though the VC insurgency campaign and the insecurity it generates have disrupted many aspects of SVN's economic activity, there are as yet no signs of serious inflationary pressures. Prices have been relatively stable and the money supply nearly constant for over a year. Adequate supplies of foodstuffs are kept circulating to urban areas; exports of rubber continue to constitute the GVN's chief source of foreign exchange. Since late 1959, the GVN has concentrated on preserving the status quo and done little to stimulate economic development; but the recent enactment of its Second Five-Year Plan may presage a renewed attempt at economic growth. This surface economic calm, however,

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has its illusory aspects; for the VC have disruptive capabilities they have never used. Rubber continues to be produced in exportable quantities partly because the taxation of plantations provide the VC with a lucrative source of revenue. Commercial road and water transport continues to function relatively unmolested for analogous reasons. Were the VC to exercise their strangulation potential in conjunction with an all-out offensive, economic conditions in SVN would be markedly altered, at least temporarily, in very short order.

V. PROSPECTS

46. In the near-term future, the Communists will probably continue to conduct the insurgency campaign in SVN as an ostensibly internal "war of national liberation." Though VC forces may mount an offensive or step up the pace of their operations, it is unlikely that the Communists will alter the character of the struggle in a manner that would entail the risk of a direct confrontation between US and Bloc military forces, including DRV forces acknowledged as such.

47. If the US presence and assistance programs are maintained at present levels, GVN military forces will be able to contain the

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VC military threat and may be able to mount offensives which will reduce its immediate gravity.

48. If it adheres to its present strategic counterinsurgency plan and continues to implement certain promising programs, the GVN may be able to prevent the VC from increasing their present level of domination over South Vietnam's rural population and establish firmer GVN control over presently contested rural areas.

49. The present GVN is not likely to take the political steps necessary to reduce the VC threat to a point where the US could significantly diminish its present involvement in the South Vietnamese struggle.

4 MAY 1984

Ms. Janice R. Hanover
U.S. News & World Report
2300 N Street, NW
Washington, DC 20037

Dear Ms. Hanover:

This is our final response to your 30 October 1981 Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request for declassification and release of NIE 53-63 dated 17 April 1963 and its first draft dated 19 November 1962.

After a thorough search of our records, we were able to locate both documents. We have carefully reviewed the documents, both of which have been declassified and may be released to you in segregable form. Deletions have been made pursuant to FOIA exemptions (b)(3). The denying official is Mr. Louis J. Dube, Information Review Officer for the Directorate of Operations. Copies of the documents together with an explanation of the exemption are enclosed.

I am informing you of your right to appeal the above decisions by addressing your appeal to the CIA Information Review Committee, in my care. Should you decide to do this, please explain the basis of your appeal.

In reference to your 1 December 1981 letter wherein you wished "to make my request more specific by asking for the Development File on the 1962/1963 'Prospects in South Vietnam,' which was issued as NIE 53-63," it is my understanding that in an attempt to clarify the term "Development File," a member of my staff called you on 15 December 1981. During that telephone conversation, you reconfirmed your desire for copies of only the two documents referred to in paragraph two above. If my understanding is incorrect, please let me know.

The costs incurred in the processing of your request amounted to \$20.10, consisting of one hour of professional search time at \$3.50 per quarter hour, totaling \$14, and 10 cents a page for 61 pages of released material, totaling \$6.10. Please send your check or money order to me in the amount of \$20.10 made payable to the Treasurer of the United States. You should refer to our number F81-1019 to ensure proper credit to your account.

We wish to apologize for the length of time it has taken us to complete the processing of your request. We have been inundated, however, by a large number of requests over the past several years. Under the circumstances, we can only do our best to apportion our time and efforts in a manner calculated to satisfy all of our requesters. Thus, we have adopted the policy of first-received, first-answered. Thank you for your patience and consideration while we were completing the processing of your request.

Sincerely,

/s/ Larry R. Strawderman

Larry R. Strawderman
Information and Privacy Coordinator

Enclosures

IPD/FO/msc(11 November 1983)

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