

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

30 August 1972

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT : Conflicting Estimates of the Pacification
Situation in South Vietnam

- REFERENCES: (A) South Vietnam: The Communists Strike at
Pacification. State Department, Bureau
of Intelligence Research, 2 August 1972
- (B) Assessment of the Political and Anti-
Pacification Efforts of the Communists
During the Current Offensive. U.S.
Embassy Saigon 11464, 4 August 1972

1. The conflicting estimates found in the two referenced documents stem from basic differences in initial approach rather than major discrepancies in data or information used. The assessment of the U.S. Mission, which focuses on a comparison of the Communists' achievements versus their intentions, concludes that the deterioration in pacification has been a by-product of the NVA military offensive. The Mission views the offensive itself as a phenomenon, arguing that when it has run its course the Government of Vietnam (GVN) will again extend its influence throughout the countryside. The Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR), on the other hand, views the events since April of this year as an effort by the Communists to wrest control of the countryside and defeat the pacification programs of the GVN. Thus, INR sees the deterioration in pacification as less of a temporary situation and more of a long term Communist program that began before the military offensive and will continue when the shock troops go to ground. With such a discrepancy between the conceptual frameworks of the two papers, it is impossible to reconcile them or to "average them out." Moreover, both papers contain a central thesis of considerable merit which would be lost or neutered if the papers were to be merged.

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2. One of the principal arguments of INR is that the rural pacification situation began to deteriorate prior to the offensive and this deterioration merely continued at an accelerated pace after 30 March. From a strictly numerical standpoint, the first part of this argument is correct -- GVN control of the rural population began to slip in January and continued to decline in February. There were, however, several factors which rendered this statistical evidence ambiguous, both at the time it was first received and even in retrospect. First, pacification declines are not unusual for that time of year. The decline suffered in January-February 1971, for example, was greater than that experienced over the same two months in 1972. Second, issuance of the GVN pacification plan this year -- which, among other things, assigns priorities and resources -- was delayed due to the fact that it encompassed four years rather than the usual one. This delay induced a certain lethargy in the program. Third, the December 1971 ratings had been very high; showing unusual improvement over the November figures. It is probable that at least some of the decline in subsequent months represented adjustment of over-optimistic reports, since the Hamlet Evaluation System (HES) was in a turnover process (U.S. to Vietnamese) at the time.^{1/} Lastly, much of the deterioration in pacification was more closely related to preparations for the NVA offensive than to an expansion of Communist administrative control. In particular, the high number of abductions which adversely affected overall pacification ratings in January and February was related specifically to Communist logistics efforts associated with the coming offensive; and for even the Communists there are limitations to the efficiency of winning hearts and minds via abduction.

3. The basic thesis of the Mission assessment -- that the Communist leadership has been disappointed with the results of the offensive, and in particular with the performance of the local forces -- has considerable credibility but should not be overworked. In the first place, the reporting on these matters deals with various echelons of the COSVN apparatus. Most of these documents deal with district level and provincial level organizations which are having problems organizing their local force military and local political operations.

^{1/} The district-level Vietnamization program for HES involved a specific goal of A-B population prior to the actual turnover of the system to the South Vietnamese. There is evidence that these goals were met statistically prior to their being met in reality. On making his first independent evaluation, the Vietnamese evaluator often re-adjusted the figures downward to bring the ratings closer to the situation on the ground. This effect, however, by itself is not believed to be a sufficient explanation of the aggregate decline in HES ratings in early 1972.

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Since it is clearly Hanoi that is running the show, however, it is Hanoi's estimate of the situation that is the more important, but of this we know considerably less. In the second place, reports of declining morale due to shortages of personnel, medical supplies, food, etc., are as old as the war itself and should be treated more as a constant rather than as indicators of significant change, at least when broad assessments are to be made. Clearly, however, the major pacification losses to the GVN have occurred where the NVA has hit the hardest, and the recovery of pacification momentum will be most difficult where the NVA has dug in and has some local support. The litany of trouble spots, with the exception of Quang Tri, is not much different now than it was a few years ago -- it is a listing of provinces with strong Communist infrastructures. The magnitude of the problem has increased with the insertion this spring of fresh NVA forces.

4. As to the current pacification situation, there are two facets which should remain in the forefront of any analysis. First, the offensive is still in progress but to date has been reasonably well contained. While the GVN has lost large tracts of territory to enemy control, much of this territory was sparsely populated. Because of the substantial territorial gains made by the Communists -- and the tenacity with which they appear willing to defend them -- it is difficult to make direct comparisons with the Tet 1968 offensive or to intervening periods. On a strictly demographic basis, however, the degree of GVN control over the rural population now approximates what it was in August 1970. While the consistency and fidelity of HES statistics have, over the years, been subjected to a large amount of skeptical criticism, the comparison of the present to the August 1970 period is probably reasonably accurate if one bears in mind the wide disparity between population and territorial control. A second facet of the situation is that in the population control aspect of pacification, the decline due to the offensive may have levelled off. (The June 1972 aggregate figures for population under GVN control are up by one percent -- from 60 to 61 percent -- over May.)

5. In short, there is little question that pacification has been set back and that the GVN is likely to have some difficult months ahead of it. Nonetheless, the pacification effort thus far has not suffered irreparable damage, and such damage does not appear likely over the next two or three months. Beyond that period, however, there simply are too many unknown and perhaps unknowable factors involved to make a confident assessment. Pacification must be viewed in the context of the overall mix of factors affecting the situation in Indochina. Perhaps the most accurate -- though hardly earth shaking -- conclusion possible now is that while pacification has been hurt, particularly in areas where the

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fighting has been most fierce and the NVA presence strongest, its future depends in large part on events that have yet to run their course (e. g., the current Communist offensive) and on future contingencies (e. g., a ceasefire), the likelihood of which we cannot estimate at this time.

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