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FROM: ███████████ Assistant for Information, DDA

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SUBJECT: ███████████ Article

REFERENCE: PRB-032-78

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I find nothing in ███████████ article on the political reasons for the fall of South Vietnam to which the Publications Review Board should object. In cases such as this, however, it is particularly important that the published article carry a disclaimer of official origin. I refer in particular to the uncomplimentary (though probably accurate) references to the governments of Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Nigeria, Ghana, and the Philippines on page 4.

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Some Reflections on the Politics of

Counterinsurgency in Vietnam*

by ███████████   STATINTL

By the time Saigon fell in April 1975, the Vietnam war was probably the most studied in history. This is undoubtedly because of the political and bureaucratic antipathies engendered by the massive US role in the war. But the focus on the US and the shortcomings of its assistance to Vietnam has had a tendency to obscure the impact of Vietnamese political developments on the ability of the GVN to mobilize the resources required for counterinsurgency.

The purpose of this brief paper is to reflect on "what went wrong" from a political perspective. I want to review the reasons for and the consequences of the GVN's repeated failure to accommodate demands for the expansion of political participation. For the GVN made the mistake of treating its political opposition as if it were in league with the insurgents. This attitude had the effect of alienating the population of the most secure parts of South Vietnam and of denying the government the legitimacy so vital to creating a political alternative to the Viet Cong.

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* *Not to be cited or quoted without permission of the author.*

I.

Some years ago I compiled a series of maps from Communist
sources that showed the extent of "liberated" territories in South
Vietnam in 1945, 1954, 1965 and 1970.* I then compared these maps
with the historical research that had been done on local rebellions
in southern Vietnam during the 19th and early 20th centuries. These
maps, when overlaid on each other, were striking in two respects:

-- first, Viet Cong strongholds had traditionally been
   sources of anti-government activity.

-- second, Communist control beyond these areas expanded
   only marginally over the twenty-five years from
   1945 to 1970.**

This is not to say, I should hasten to add, that GVN claims of
pacified territory were vindicated by my research, but that there
had definitely not been a very substantial expansion of Communist

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* For details, see my "The Partition of Vietnam and the Unfinished
Revolution," in Thomas E. Hachey, ed., The Problem of Partition: Peril
to World Peace (Chicago: Rand, McNally, 1972), pp 214-250.

** The extent of both GVN and PRG control in the period from 1973 to
the collapse of the GVN changed more dramatically than in any prior
period. But again, what is striking about Communist advances is that
they were confined largely to areas over which they had traditionally
held sway, and from which they had been dislodged only by vigorous US
and ARVN operations between 1968 and 1972.

control over territory or population for nearly the entire period of the war. Hence, the importance that must be ascribed to the politics of the struggle, especially the degree to which the GVN's responses to both the Communist and its own domestic opposition affected the outcome.

Yet, one of the least well understood aspects of the Vietnamese experience is the importance of politics in war. Post-mortems on the fall of the GVN generally stress the impact of Communist violations of the Paris Agreement in 1973 and 1974 (which made possible the prepositioning of troops and supplies for the 1975 offensive) and the waning political will in the United States to counter these violations. These are the wrong starting points for understanding what happened in April 1975. For the GVN collapsed from within (as the Communists predicted it would), and it did so despite a decade of massive American support for the war because the GVN still did not represent a political alternative to the Viet Cong.

II.

The circumstances surrounding the rise and fall of South Vietnam's nine governments between 1954-1975 need not be reviewed here. But for the purpose of this paper, it is important to recall what these governments all had in common. They depended for their support either on a faction of the military officer corps or on a religious organization. However creative Vietnamese (and, later,

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American) institutional draftsmen were throughout the period, the GVN never outgrew its cabal-like and repressive character. As one Vietnamese political leader put it: these regimes "present an image of a centralized government filled with power, but in reality they are cowardly, incapable, confused and closed, an administration of decrees and arrêtes."

There was a time in the life of each of these regimes, nevertheless, when their authoritarianism seemed a welcome relief from the instability generated by waves of street demonstrations and successive coups. But it is important to keep in mind that societies can be immobilized either by anarchy or by the response to it (i.e., repression by police and other security forces). Argentina today would be a good example. Eventually, there is stagnation, and with it, the tendency for government to come to rest in the hands of the elite group (usually, the professional military) that possesses a monopoly on force. The intervention of the military into politics under these conditions is far from a temporary expedient; hence the "staying power" of such juntas as those in Brazil, Chile, Nigeria, and the tendency of "martial law" administrations elsewhere (e.g., Ghana, the Philippines) to become institutionalized. For societies that have gone through these experiences, "stability" may become essential to economic growth, thus providing a new legitimacy to the regime in power (often regardless of its attitude toward the expansion of popular political participation).

For such regimes, stability is an end in itself. Public order -- rather than popular political mobilization -- becomes the gauge of its strength. The regime holds on to power by divide-and-conquer tactics; this means that its survival virtually depends on keeping all other political forces weak.

Countering insurgency requires more than the capacity to maintain public order, however. In such situations, governments require the active support and cooperation of the people to defeat the insurgent politically and militarily. For the insurgent makes two interrelated claims that the government cannot refute as long as it refuses to expand political participation: first, that the government lacks legitimacy and, second, that it cannot draw support (political, economic, or military) from the population it claims to govern. In such situations, counterinsurgency depends both on what the government can do to prevent the insurgent from making headway through unconventional warfare and on the degree to which the population can be effectively mobilized to the government's cause. The latter task often conflicts directly with what the regime feels it must do to survive against its rivals. Nowhere was this tension more acute than in Vietnam between 1967 and 1975.

III.

Because those who controlled the GVN treated demands for expanding political participation by organizations other than the ones it

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created or could control as a threat to their hold on power, the GVN consistently failed to take advantage of the resources its own population could bring to bear in the struggle with the Viet Cong. Two primary examples of this come to mind, but before describing them I think it important to review briefly the nature of the political culture that existed apart (unfortunately) from the government in Saigon.

Much has been written about the social and political complexity (see map) of South Vietnam.* By 1970, some twenty-seven active political groups existed in South Vietnam (50 groups were officially recognized as "political parties" by the Ministry of Interior). By and large, these groups were either religiously or regionally based. What functions did they serve?

The principal religions of southern Vietnam, (Mahayana and Theravad Buddhism, Catholicism, Hoa Hao, and Cao Dai) provided for many a socialization into politics by teaching effective models of political organization and action. This latter function proved extremely important -- despite the fact that it was never treated by

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* See, for example, my "Government and the Countryside: Political Accommodation and South Vietnam's Communal Groups," ORBIS (Summer 1969), pp 502-525 and "South Vietnam: Neither War nor Peace," Asian Survey (February 1970), pp 107-132, and the studies by others cited in these articles.

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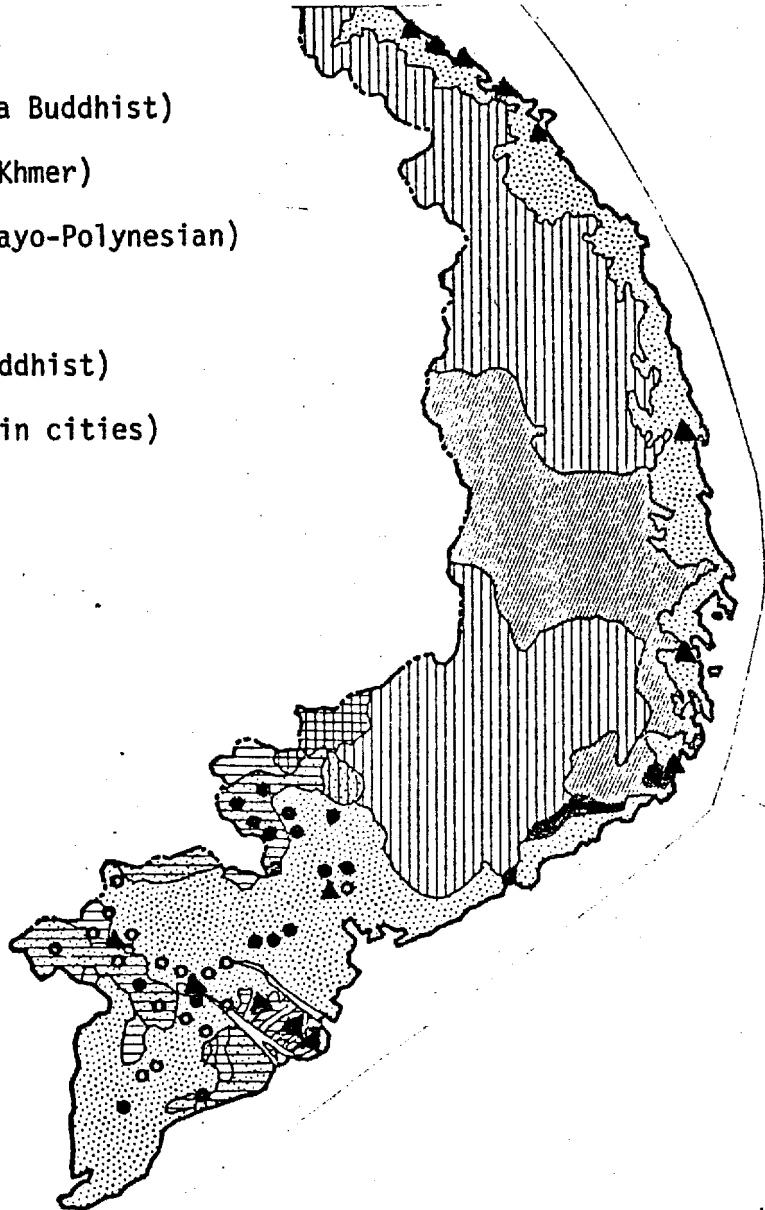
Socio-Political Complexity in South Vietnam (circa 1970)

MAJOR ETHNIC GROUPS

Vietnamese (Mahayana Buddhist)

Tribal Groups (Mon-Khmer)

Tribal Grounds (Malayo-Polynesian)

Cham

Khmer (Theravada Buddhist)

(Chinese concentrated mainly in cities)

RELIGIOUS MINORITIES

● Cao Dai

◉ Hoa Hao

▲ Catholic

the GVN as an asset -- in forming the anti-communist core of a
modern military establishment and in compensating for the GVN's
inattention to political indoctrination in training regular forces
and civil defense cadres. It could rightly be said, I think, that
the anti-communism of the South Vietnamese population was the result
more of the work of the religions than the government.

Regionalism, while often cited as an obstacle to national
integration in Vietnam, played an important part in lending cohesion
to army divisions and instilling them with a sense of mission (especially
when it came to territorial defense). Regional roots also proved
important to assuring that the vast migration to the cities, as well
as the existence of a huge refugee population, occurred with a minimum
of anarchy and the psychological strains that accompanied such
phenomena elsewhere. The principal vehicle here was the traditional,
local "burial and self-help organization" that provided social welfare
services to millions of people the GVN failed to reach effectively.
Whole districts of Saigon, plus many provincial cities and refugee
camps, were virtually run by these organizations.

With respect to the rural population, the social and religious
organizations mentioned above also contributed importantly to the
maintenance of a corporate life and to agricultural production in ways
that made relatively little demands on the central government for re-
sources.* Unlike the "hydraulic society" of the North, which required

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* This is a point made in Robert L. Sansom's study of The Economics
of Insurgency in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam (Cambridge, Mass: MIT
Press, 1970), especially pp 160-163.

vast amounts of collectivized labour to maintain the dikes, rural society in the South was able to prosper more autonomously. The intervillage cooperation that was required, moreover, was facilitated by the religious organizations which managed to maintain the canals of the Mekong Delta and feed at least three-quarters of the population of the whole country (plus the Communist forces that operated in the South) by cultivating only a fraction of the arable land.

In terms of mobilizing the political groups spawned by religions or regionalism, there were in my view two critical periods for the GVN, one in 1966 and the other in 1968-1970. The GVN's response to demands by these groups for the expansion of political participation had the effect of alienating the population from its cause. Had the response of the GVN been different, it would have derived two key benefits: it would have inherited (from the religions) an already legitimate anti-communist ideology and it would have been able to support on-going social welfare and self-help programs rather than appear in competition with them. Instead, the leaders of the GVN viewed such political and social activism as threat to their own survival.

In early 1966, the government of Nguyen cao Ky committed itself to organizing elections and drafting a constitution as a consequence of the US-GVN summit meeting in Honolulu that February. Ky pledged "to formulate a democratic constitution in the months ahead, including

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an electoral law; to take that constitution to our people for dis-
cussion and modification; to create on the basis of elections rooted
in that constitution, an elected government." Ky's return from Honolulu,
however, brought little subsequent progress in either drafting a con-
stitution or preparations for holding elections. Instead, Ky continued
to focus on consolidating his support within the coalition of generals
in the National Leadership Committee (the Directory) that ran the GVN.

As part of his strategy, in early March, Ky called for the
resignation of General Nguyen canh Thi, the popular commander of the
I Corps region and one of Ky's principal rivals within the Directory.
Within two days of the resignation order, riots and demonstrations
calling for the reinstatement of General Thi and tangible progress
toward free elections broke out in DaNang (the administrative capital
of I Corps), Hue, and other major urban centers. Ky, in turn, de-
clared martial law, and ordered army troops to occupy Buddhist pagodas
and to arrest Buddhist leaders.

Ky regarded this struggle movement primarily as a demonstration
of support for General Thi rather than for elections. As such, he
responded in military rather than political terms.

The demand for reinstatement of General Thi, however, was
rapidly overshadowed by the demand for a new constitution and elections,
and reflected the desire of the Buddhists to participate in the process

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of government rather than to overthrow it. This is a key point that the government failed to realize. While a constitution was subsequently drafted and elections held in which some Buddhists political leaders participated, throughout the period government security forces continued to arrest leaders of the demonstration. The result was that the government system created in 1966-1967 lacked legitimacy from the outset.*

This made the political developments of the 1968-1970 period even more striking. The Communist's Tet Offensive turned Americans off to the war. It had the opposite effect on large segments of the South Vietnam population. As I have noted in some detail elsewhere, Tet convinced many Vietnamese political leaders that their principal enemy was the Viet Cong, not each other.** To this end, and to the surprise of many, after the Tet offensive the leaders of even opposition political organizations sought to participate in the GVN. They sought, especially, to accelerate the establishment of local self-defense forces and to work closely with provincial government authorities in social welfare and community development projects.

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* For an excellent analysis of what "legitimacy" meant to the Vietnamese, see Steven Young (citation to be supplied).

** See Politics in War: The Bases of Political Community in South Vietnam. (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1973).

At the national level, moreover, even those members of the opposition who had been imprisoned by the Ky government or its predecessors were seeking to run for election to the national assembly.

Perhaps the most dramatic example of this change in attitude appeared within militant Buddhist political organizations. All of the members of the 1966 Struggle Coordinating Committee, for example, were by 1969, leaders in Buddhist social welfare services. The order of the day for these social welfare organizations and local Buddhist hierarchies in general was cooperation with the government.

In only rare cases, however, was such cooperation welcomed in Saigon and used as a means of bridging the gap between the government and the population. All too often, Thieu and his close circle of advisors evaluated such actions on the part of other politicans in terms of the impact they might have on Thieu's ability to remain in power rather than on what they could contribute to the war effort. Thus, most who sought a stake in the GVN even on Thieu's terms were denied it.

IV.

In an interview in Paris in 1970, North Vietnam's chief negotiator at the stalemated Paris Talks made the following prediction:

> It is unnecessary to negotiate because we will win...
> the South Vietnamese administration is strong, but it will
> gradually be weakened by internal disputes. Then, time and
> patience will be the factors in our victory. It is not
> necessary to use an athlete to knock down a sick man.

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Throughout more than three decades of warfare, the Communists never wavered in their conviction that victory depended as much on what they achieved on the battlefield as on the political weakness and corruption of the South Vietnamese government. In April 1975, their view proved right.

Has Hanoi found the formula for success in wars of national liberation? For Hanoi's strategy of revolutionary war to succeed, what is required beyond a similarly organized armed struggle movement is the unwitting cooperation of the government it seeks to overthrow. So the answer to the question posed above could depend largely on the level of political participation that occurs in the societies where insurgent challenges exist or are likely. There are few instances in which the leaders of governments of the type described here find it in their immediate interest to respond positively to demands for the expansion of political participation.* And, as noted above, resistance to expanding political participation has a tendency to become institutionalized. If it does, this could virtually assure that movements of the type Hanoi created will suceed provided their time horizon is long enough.

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* Such examples would include the experiences of Ghandi and Nehru in India,Mao in China,. Magsaysay in the Philippines, Nyerere in Tanzania. For a systematic discussion of the pros and cons involved in expanding political particiption, see Samuel P. Huntington and Joan M. Nelson, No Easy Choice: Political Participation in Developing Countries (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976).

This conclusion is clearly of great potential significance to states who view the success of such movements as benefitting the projection of their power. And the record so far must look very good to the insurgent as well. Indeed, of the fifty-eight limited wars that have been fought since 1945, thirty-six have been insurgencies and the incumbent government has prevailed only half the time. (See Annex). Given these odds, the need for understanding the politics of counterinsurgency may be no less pressing today than it was when the struggle over South Vietnam began.

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ANNEX (DRAFT)

Limited Wars Since 1945

Place and Date	Opponents (Winner, if Applicable, in Italics)	Objective	Type of Warfare
Indonesia, 1945-47	Netherlands v. Rebels	independence	conventional
China, 1945-1949	KMT v. Communists	power	revolutionary
Kashmir, 1947-1949	India v. Pakistan	security	conventional
Greece, 1946-1949	Govt. v. ELAS Rebels	power	guerrilla
Israel, 1948-1949	Isarel v. Arabs	security	conventional
Philippines, 1948-1952	Government v. Huks	power	guerrilla
Indochina, 1945-1954	France v. Viet Minh	independence	revolutionary
Malaya, 1945-1954	Britain & Govt. v. rebels	power	guerrilla
Korea, 1950-1953	UN & South Korea v. China & N. Korea	power	conventional
Kenya, 1952-1961	Britain v. Mau Mau	power	guerrilla
Sudan, 1955-1972	Govt. v. Anyanya rebels	autonomy	guerrilla
Sinai, 1956	Israel v. Egypt	security	conventional
Suez, 1956	Gr. Britain, France, & Israel v. Egypt	security	conventional
Hungary, 1956	USSR v. Govt.	security	conventional
Quemoy-Matsu, 1954-58	Chinese nationalists v. PRC	security	conventional
Lebanon, 1958	US and Govt. v. rebels	power	conventional
Tibet 1950-1959	PRC v. Tibetans	security	conventional
Cyprus 1955-1959	Britain v. Eoka Rebels	power	guerrilla
Algeria 1956-1962	France v. rebels	independence	revolutionary
Cuba 1958-1959	Govt. v. Castro	power	guerrilla
Laos, 1959-1975	Govt & US v. Pathet Lao & North Vietnam	power	revolutionary
Goa, 1961	India v. Portugal	security	conventional
Iraq, 1961-1970	Kurdish rebels v. govt	autonomy	guerrilla

Limited Wars Since 1945 (continued)

Place and Date	Opponents (Winner, if Applicable, in Italics)	Objective	Type of Warfare
Yemen, 1962–1970	royalists v. government	power	conventional
Congo(Zaire) 1960–1962	Govt. & UN v. mutineers & secessionists	autonomy	conventional
Cuba, 1961 (Bay of Pigs)	Cuban refugees & US v. government	power	conventional
Vietnam, 1959–1975	US & S. Vietnam v. Viet Cong & N. Vietnam	power	revolutionary
Himalayas, 1959–1962	India v. PRC	security	conventional
Angola 1960–1975	Portugal v. rebels	independence	revolutionary
West New Guniea, 1962	Netherlands v. Indonesia	independence	conventional
Colombia, 1960–present	Government v. rebels	power	guerrilla
Venezuela, 1963	Government v. rebels	power	guerrilla
Malaysia, 1963–1966	Britian & Malaysia v. Indonesia	national security	guerrilla
Ethiopia, 1964	Ethiopia v. Somalia	security	conventional
Congo(Zaire) 1964–1965	Govt. v. Simba rebels	autonomy	conventional
Thailand, 1964–present	Govt. v. Northeastern insurgents	power	revolutionary
Dominican Republic, 1965	Govt. & US v. rebels	power	conventional
Peru, 1965	Govt. v. rebels	power	guerrilla
Kashmir, 1965	Pakistan v. India	national security	conventional
Nigeria, 1967–1970	Biafran secessionists v. Nigerian government	autonomy	conventional
Middle East, 1967	Israel v. Arabs	national security	conventional
Czechoslovakia, 1968	Dubcek Govt. v. USSR & Warsaw Pact	national security	conventional
Northern Ireland, 1969–present	Catholics & IRA v. Protestants & Britain	autonomy	guerrilla

Limited Wars Since 1945 (continued)

Place and Date	Opponents (Winner, if Applicable, in Italics)	Objective	Type of Warfare
Chad, 1969-1971	*Government & France* v. Arab rebels	autonomy	guerrilla
El Salvador, 1969-1970	El Salvador v. Honduras	security	conventional
Cambodia, 1970-1975	US & Lon Nol Govt. v. Cambodian United National Front	power	revolutionary
Burma, 1970-current	Govt. v.U Nu and ethnic rebels	power/autonomy	guerrilla
Jordan, 1970-71	Govt. v. Palestinian commandos	security	guerrilla
Bangladesh, 1971	West Pakistan v. *E. Pakistan and India*	autonomy	conventional
Middle East, 1969-72	*Iran* v. United Arab Emirates & Iraq	security	conventional
Burundi, 1972	*Batutsi tribesmen* v. Bahutu	autonomy	conventional
Middle East,1973	Israel v. *Arabs*	territory	conventional
Philippines, 1973-present	Govt. v. *Moslem rebels*	autonomy	conventional
Angola, 1975	*MPLA* V. FNLA and Unita	power	guerilla
Ethoopia, 1977-78	*Ethiopia and Cubans* v. Somalia	territory	conventional
Rhodesia, 1960-present	Govt. v. Zapu, Zanu	power	guerilla
Zaire, 1977	*Govt.* v. Katangan Dissidents	autonomy	guerilla
Ethiopia, 1960-present	Govt. v. ELF, EPFL	autonomy	guerilla

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