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Short and the Long in Counterinsurgency Planning: Some...

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The Short and the Long in Counterinsurgency Planning:

Some thoughts on the lessons from Vietnam
By Abraham M. Hirsch, AID

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By now, some lessons are beginning to emerge from the Vietnam contest. They are becoming evident from among the many mixed indicators that point to successes and failures of a variety of American and Vietnamese endeavors, begun over a number of years, assessed, dropped or modified, and often reinitiated albeit in different form. This paper deals only with certain civilian-type programs. Military efforts and operations, and intelligence or counterintelligence programs, purposely are left out of this discussion.

In the present context (August 1969) operators and administrators in the field still are engaged heavily in fighting or offsetting enemy efforts, but the situation is changing, and the outlines of a post-hostilities situation are becoming discernible, even through the haze of the current political talks and military maneuvers. This hardly is a time for reaching conclusions, but it may be an appropriate time to pause to reflect. What is beginning to be apparent to stateside planners, engaged in postulating assistance projects that would follow those carried on in wartime, is that the legacy of the counterinsurgency period may come to bedevil future nation building programs.

Counterinsurgency operations in Vietnam in the 1960's took a wide variety of forms. Their primary purpose was to isolate the enemy from the civilian population--to isolate him not necessarily geographically

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but in every other sense at least--and to strengthen the non-enemy population in resisting enemy threats or enticements. Most of these endeavors, conducted on the American side mainly by A.I.D. (USAID) and the Office of Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) (and its predecessor units) came under the heading of pacification, a term that never was accurately or definitively defined, but which took on connotations of "winning hearts and minds", "nation building", "territorial security" and "rural development".

The several U.S. organizations which participated in that effort within CORDS, and USAID which operates both within and outside of CORDS, viewed pacification in various lights. Each organization tended to bring to bear on the subject the particular viewpoints and disciplines which characterized their respective officials, and which formed the basis for their respective participation in the common effort. For all these organizations, pacification meant a challenge to adapt older procedures used by the U.S. Government in different settings under different circumstances, to the particular requirements of the Vietnam contest. As a rule, civilians agreed that the Vietnam contest was different from a conventional war, different from anything that the United States had been engaged in military or non-military at any time. Most of these officials, and nearly all of the policymakers at high levels, had seen service elsewhere, and clearly could distinguish between the peculiar set of circumstances in Vietnam and those which had governed their experiences in other assignments. These civilian officials generally agreed that in Vietnam the U.S. military had to do their thing in a manner different from that in conventional war; and

hence, that civilian agencies too had to do their thing in a manner different from that in which they operated elsewhere.

Every process of adaptation raises problems, both of success and of failure. Some of these problems, and what they may teach, are singled out for discussion here.

The Character of Counterinsurgency Efforts: The pacification effort represented a proliferation of tactical objectives. In the absence of a clear definition, pacification led to an operational assumption that the more that was done by the Government of Vietnam (GVN) and its U.S. assistants, the better. It was felt by American planners that no effort should be spared, no resources denied, if there was any chance that a marginal input might make a difference, no matter how small, in our favor. Just as the military did not hesitate to throw millions of dollars worth of armament into a foray which might yield the liquidation of a dozen enemy soldiers, so also the civilian effort put a premium not on cost accountancy or on standard input-out ratios, but rather on gaining small victories, no matter how small in the total context.

Americans like to do things on an American scale. When we get going, we really get going. The input of resources into any civilian program thus nearly always involved asymmetrical proportions of GVN and American inputs. The United States simply was able to muster resources of money, materials, and men which the GVN could not match even if it had wanted to. This led to a number of efforts which very clearly became characterized by American dominance, high American visibility, and low GVN visibility. Of course, nearly everything that

A.I.D. and CORDS did were done in the GVN's name. At the same time, they were often done without the GVN's full support, or, indeed, its full understanding of what we were trying to do: the inputs that were made were American inputs. In any event, they had to be because of their magnitude, if not because of their substance; this was inevitable, given our policy of doing all that we felt should be done, no matter how marginal the returns. The fact that the GVN had so few resources at its command with which to maintain its "presence" inevitable and predictably meant that a great many endeavors had to be carried out by Americans and à l'américaine, or not at all. The decision, at any time, to have large and diverse programs also meant to proceed on a scale and a pace that were bound to leave the GVN behind.

Blended with this was a difference in what Americans and Vietnamese consider to be proper planning. Americans, when compared to Vietnamese, are notably tolerant of failure--provided only that the intention was right and the plan used was practicable. We take a setback in our stride, and it does not deter us from trying again. For a variety of attitudinal reasons, Vietnamese are not tolerant of failure. Every setback is a disaster, an unredeemable catastrophe, a frightful aggravation of what already is a bad situation, no matter how good was the intention or how plausible was the plan: it is the pragmatic outcome of the endeavor that determined whether it should have been undertaken in the first place. Vietnamese are much more cautious. What Americans consider to be adequate planning often is viewed as inadequate by the Vietnamese, who put their emphasis not on implementation as such but on a zero possibility of failure in implementation once implementation

has begun. Thus Vietnamese require a far longer planning period than Americans, and moreover are far more hesitant to pass from the planning to the implementation stage. In joint endeavors, the rate of progress, both in terms of planning and in terms of implementation, became Americanized, again leaving the Vietnamese behind. In spite of the great pains Americans took to plan and implement only behind a GVN facade, to the Vietnamese population and to their officials joint endeavors always carried the imprint of the foreigners: tempo and wealth, not to say haste and waste.

Assumptions of Counterinsurgency Efforts: Underlying the civilian programs was the assumption that insurgencies stem in whole or in part from the disaffection of the population with a weak, inept, inefficient, and corrupt government; and that in this kind of a situation, the thing to do is to help that government acquire stature in the eyes of the people by doing things--for the government and with it--to endear it to the people. On the civilian side, the things to be done, in large measure, were things that the population would find useful and beneficial: schools, hospitals, roads and culverts, pig stys and seed rice, village wells and latrines, etc. In retrospect, there is little doubt that these efforts, accompanied by others that are outside of the civilian pacification program as discussed here, have done much for the population. At the same time, there is no evidence, as yet, that it has won their hearts and minds, or that it has bridged significantly the gap between people and government. If the GVN today has greater acceptance on the part of the Vietnamese population than it had, say in 1965, it may well be that this increase in stature stems

from a number of factors outside of the pacification program, or even outside of the sum of all GVN efforts. The U.S.-designed pacification program made three assumptions that can be challenged: The first is that the alternative in Vietnam clearly was between the GVN and its NLF/North Vietnamese enemy. This approach reflects American attitudes, which tend to polarize things between good and evil, and which see a neat good and a neat evil inevitably as the sole contestants in any contest. In the context of Vietnam politics things never can be structured in simple bi-polar terms. The American approach tended to ignore the existence of subnational political entities, which traditionally in Vietnam have played an important role, and which somehow or other hardly ever were enlisted against the enemy except to the degree that they were invited to support the Saigon government. The Vietnamese, however, are pluralists, who tend to see many options and alternatives available to them, and who tend never to structure situations in simple bi-polar terms. For the Vietnamese the choice never has been a simple one between Saigon and the Viet Cong. Yet all that was done with U.S. Government assistance was done on behalf of the Saigon Government. Since in Vietnamese tradition the central government always is the last thing that one supports (one puts up with it perhaps, but one doesn't support it), this approach to pacification was a largely American one, and one that did not capitalize on all available anti-Viet Cong political resources in the country.

The second challenge of the assumption is the belief that by giving the GVN material resources with which to carry out its programs, the GVN was put in a favorable limelight or the American initiative or

or presence camouflaged to any significant extent. It is doubtful that the fact that American efforts always were given a GVN facade impressed the Vietnamese. For one thing, the Vietnamese daily--in their personal, official or business patterns of behavior--rarely engage in ventures that they carry out directly. In the Vietnamese pattern of behavior, direct confrontations are avoided. The Vietnamese tend to engage in what elsewhere^{1/} I have called "semi-actions", "diffuse, inconclusive acts of a covert rather than overt nature", using intermediary persons or things, real or fictitious. Likely the Vietnamese fully understood our use of the GVN as an intermediate effort, but in their view this would have strengthened rather than weakened the awareness that these programs were American inspired, not GVN initiated. Besides, in later French times, the French colonial administration also tried maximally to operate behind a facade staffed by Vietnamese indigenous officials, which in no way detracted from the non-Vietnamese character of the French colonial administration. (It would not make sense to a Vietnamese to assume that generally the roles were the reverse, and that it was the Saigon government that was using the Americans as intermediaries; the balance of military and financial power in favor of the Americans was too obvious to make such an assumption credible.)

A third assumption open to challenge is that the "winning hearts and minds" and nation-building objectives of pacification in fact were or are attainable in a matter of years, within the time-phase that was politically acceptable to American planners. There can be no doubt that since 1966 the writ of the central government has come to encom-

^{1/} "Attitudinal Differences Between Vietnamese and Americans", Saigon, 1967 (privately reproduced)

pass much more than it had earlier; or that there now is a very great awareness of the existence of a central government, and of the positive or negative role that it can play in the life even of the remotest peasant. But one would hesitate to say flatly that a great many hearts and minds have been won through pacification.

If a qualitative change has occurred in the very recent past, and I believe it has, it is that far more Vietnamese today have become convinced of the danger of the Viet Cong to themselves, in personalized terms, not necessarily in over-all political terms (in terms of the confrontation between the GVN and its foes). Undoubtedly, the Viet Cong have alienated many hearts and many minds. They have done this largely all on their own--not within the framework of our pacification effort, but outside of it.

"To win hearts and minds". An American and Western concept. A war of insurgency in a country like Vietnam does not necessarily revolve around hearts and minds. What really counts is what an individual does, rather than what he chooses or says he chooses, or thinks he chooses. Not every villager who tolerates the nighttime presence of Viet Cong officials, or pays them what they call "taxes", or fails to give the GVN security forces tipoffs on Viet Cong movements or caches, or reports American or GVN movements to the Viet Cong, has his heart or mind rooting for a Viet Cong victory. He need not be a Viet Cong sympathizer; he may just be scared. As a rule, Vietnamese are not motivated primarily by ideology; those that are are the exception rather than the rule. In the very protracted contest that has been

waged in Vietnam (the Vietnamese have lived in non-peace conditions since 1945, if not since 1941), the laws of survival demand a pragmatic fence-sitting. Most Vietnamese have learned to sit on that fence as if impaled.

Two types of forces get people off that fence, positive or negative. The Vietnamese tend not to be ideological but pragmatic, far less idealists and very much materialistic realists; they are responsive much more to economic than to ideological or political considerations. In the long-run a Vietnamese will join the side that has demonstrated that it can do things for him, that it can make him wealthy or at least well-off or better off. He will support those leaders who successfully can demonstrate to him that they care for him and can take care of him and his kin. The Vietnamese fence-sitter will get off his fence if he feels that it is to his advantage to do so, materially, economically; the way to his heart (and he does have a heart) and to his mind (and he does have a mind) leads through his pocketbook. The other type of incentive is negative--threats. He can be gotten off the fence if he is forced to because his life on the fence is endangered, either because he has reason to fear reprisals against his fence-sitting, or because the fence itself is undermined and destroyed. In large measure, his village and hamlet, with its social and cultural and economic institutions, are that fence. It is this set of rice-roots institutions which provide him with the security and reassurance which make fence-sitting possible. If he is isolated from village society, or if the village physically is assailed and breached or destroyed, the basis for fence-sitting is removed, and fence-sitting itself no longer possible.

Short-term demonstrations of incentives, or of threats, are not in and of themselves impressive, and have become less and less so as the

war has been protracted. The liberation of a village by either side does not dis-fence the villagers until such time as they can be assured that the side that has obtained control of their village is there to stay. Even then, dis-fencing will not occur automatically. The whole political history of Vietnamese villages is a history of living under the rule of one side or another, without however joining it; being subjects of the emperor but not citizens of his state; being in the kingdom without being of the kingdom; at best of being not-in-opposition without being among the supporters. Thus implanted physical assets--a new school, bridge, village road, etc.--do not lead to dis-fencing quickly. If the fortunes of war change, they merely become monuments to the wisdom of remaining on the fence in spite of momentary but illusory high tides of the power of one of the contesting sides, or of the other.

Moreover, even after one has dis-fenced, it is possible to jump onto the fence again. Re-fencing may be difficult, but it can be done. It is possible if one has not, while being off the fence, antagonized those who have chosen to remain upon it, or whittled away at the fence, or with a burst of partisan exuberance lastingly disqualified oneself for further fence-sitting.

I have often told this metaphoric story when asked to say something about how the present contest in Vietnam will end. I evoked this peasant, a simple, non-ideological man living in a hut on the edge of the area where GVN control ends and Viet Cong control begins. Every night as he lays down to sleep and every morning as he arises, he faces

first to the east, where a GVN outpost is located down the road, and says as if to the outpost's occupants, "You're a bunch of b-----ds!" Next he turns to the west, towards where he knows some Viet Cong regulars to be hiding, and makes the same pronouncement in their direction. This he does routinely, morn and eve, over many years. But in the meantime, the advantages of what he can gain by being part of a GVN-controlled economy and polity became obvious to him, albeit slowly; and the disadvantages of living under Viet Cong domination become evident, again albeit slowly. Many years pass. The end of the Vietnam contest comes on that evening on which our peasant goes through the same declarations as always, but suddenly, as unexpectedly to himself as to his wife and children who have heard his pronouncements for years, turns again towards the east, towards the GVN outpost, and adds in their direction: "But you're my b-----ds!"

In the long run, there is every reason to believe that South Vietnam can be a viable operative nation-state. But the time-frame of that process is to be reckoned in decades, not in fiscal years. However, American concepts of pacification programming used fiscal years as the building blocks in planning for pacification, and assumes that the total effort would last less than a hundred months. To the American official, time was of the essence; it was a precious element, not a minute of which could be wasted. To the Vietnamese whose time sense is different, it must have appeared continually that every American official was convinced that if a document was signed, a fiscal allotment made, a bridge completed, a dispensary inaugurated, one day earlier, that the whole contest, the one that had been raging since

the 1940's, would end one day earlier. To the Vietnamese, this simply would not make sense, and in accordance with their attitudinal system, they conducted their part of the common endeavor using the Vietnamese attitude about time. To the Vietnamese, time is the thing of which there is lots. Time is not an obstacle to overcome. On the contrary, time is a good friend, a trusted ally, the last resort, the ultimate weapon. Time is an input to success, a valuable resource plentifully at hand. When all other resources fail, or are hard to come by, time always remains as the one available, useful, and constructive ingredient.

During the 1960's, pacification was not the only program conducted by A.I.D. in Vietnam. Outside of the pacification framework, USAID continued to conduct numbers of technical assistance programs which had as its purpose the improvement of the GVN's competence and effectiveness, and the development of national, nation-building, institutions. This part of the A.I.D. program essentially was of the type that A.I.D. conducts in numbers of less developed countries; however, in Vietnam, this part of A.I.D.'s effort also was seen as relevant to pacification, in as much as it increased the GVN's ability to support, assist, and monitor its part of the pacification endeavor. The sum of the civilian programs, pacification and non-pacification, had marked effects both on the GVN as a national administration, and in its ability to respond to the requirements of the pacification program. The Saigon administration was encouraged or pushed to engage in a large number of endeavors, much more diversified than what it had been inclined to undertake

earlier, and much more diffused throughout the national territory. The United States, with its political pressure and its managerial, financial and human technical resources, made this increment possible. At the receiving end, the Vietnamese population was offered a wide range of new services, some of which it had always wanted (e.g. schools), and some of which it came to appreciate as the services were proffered. This intensification of governmental endeavors may have had only marginal impact on the political affections of the population, as already pointed out. At the same time, it is a beginning in the direction of making the population aware of the benefits that the central government may offer them; that is where my peasant comes in. However, and last but not least, it also poses serious problems for the future.

It is doubtful that the GVN could avoid major cutbacks in the level of the services it offers to the population unless external assistance, financial and technical, will be forthcoming at quite high resources levels in the decade that follows the end of the present contest. Neither on the budgetary side, nor on the technical or managerial or personnel side, does the GVN now have resources to maintain the service infrastructure that was developed during the 1960's. If it retrenches its efforts, it will weaken its position, at least to some degree, for regardless of whether these services positively influenced the loyalties of the population, and regardless of whether they were seen by the population as coming from the GVN or from the foreigners, a reduction in these services could have a significant negative impact. On the other hand, a GVN attempt to maintain these services without major external assistance (even if it could do this)

would have serious budgetary implications, and would draw GVN technical and managerial personnel away from the priority tasks that government must perform to more marginal tasks. In the longer run, the GVN's attempt to keep all these endeavors going would undermine their prestige more than help it. Finally, these services can produce, in Vietnam as elsewhere, a vicious circle of rising expectations, which may augur badly for the government's popularity in the future.

With the benefit of hindsight then, one lesson to be learned is that the short-range considerations which prompted the make-up of the pacification effort (considerations which may or may not have been right ones) also created dilemmas upon which the GVN will be impaled once wartime conditions end, and massive external assistance ceases. This is a lesson for the future, for other contexts. The counterinsurgency planner must realize, even while the insurgency still rages and is far from resolution, that whatever he does has implications not just for the immediate period of the contest but for the longer run, post-hostilities future as well. He must tailor the growth of his counterinsurgency efforts not to the plentiful stuff available to him in the counterinsurgency environment, but to the leaner resources that likely will be all that will be on hand once the insurgency ends. In other words, the counterinsurgency planner is not planning only for a counterinsurgency effort, but for a much broader set of endeavors, some of which take place in an insurgency context, others in a later post-insurgency environment.

Another major lesson of Vietnam may emerge more clearly when elapsed time allows for greater historical perspective. It will deal with the question: What is the basic character of insurgencies? Why do they arise?

Let us hypothesize that insurgencies such as the one that occurred in Vietnam are an ailment of socio-political development. They arise when the budding modern political institutions fail to grow in a manner that allows for the resolution of both traditional and new political issues within the context of these institutions. In such a situation, it is not necessarily the issues or those that raise them that must be faulted, but the inadequate institutions themselves. Vietnamese political institutions, from 1955 to 1965, were not capable of dealing with the issues raised by a large proportion of the population. Among these can be identified the distribution of power between the central government (which in Vietnam--except during the French period, and even to a point during the French period--always had been weak, or at least had kept its distance from the villages) and local power groups; the question of identity and character of the new state, and of its leadership and administrative elite; and the pace of modernization. Added to this, of course, is the fact that in Vietnam, as in a great many of the less developed countries, the government, practically by definition, was new, inexperienced in the tasks of modern governance, and saddled with traditional handicaps such as nepotism, and ethnic or religious favoritism. Neither the older issues nor the new handicaps permitted the new political institutions

to function properly. They worked, but haltingly and imperfectly. Because of this, older foci of political loyalty retained great influence and considerable cohesion, and formed collectively or separately one or more shadow governments. These older political elites knew--and know--that they are fighting for their very survival, since they perceive their days to be numbered should the central government and its administration gain firm ascendancy. They thus stand to profit from anything that will weaken the central government, be it an externally catalyzed insurgency in which the traditional groups might or might not take part, or be it more direct anti-central government moves on the part of these traditional groups themselves.

In Vietnam our policy generally cast these traditional power groups and elites (such as the Hoa Hao and the Cao Dai) into the roles of opposition forces. They need not have been characterized as such. They may not have been able to offer much in support of the kind of national centralization to which they were opposed, but they would have had promise in relation to the minimum of national unity required for the counterinsurgency effort. For if these groups do not wish a strong central government to emerge in Saigon, neither do they wish a strong central government of revolutionary character, dominated moreover by a hostile and aggressive government from beyond the borders, to emerge as a threat to them in place of the present central government. Thus, on one level, these traditional power groups are natural opponents of the central government; but the local traditional power groups also are threatened by the insurgents, and oppose them. They are

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caught between two threats. In fighting the insurgency, such groups could have been enlisted. Instead, our counterinsurgency policy came close to ignoring them, and encouraging the central government to deal with them repressively. In this manner, the central government took on a fight on two fronts, something which never is helpful. On the one hand, the GVN had to defend itself against rebels and the invaders who sponsored them. At the same time, the central government was encouraged to fend off local traditional power groups, politically fighting them too rather than enlisting them on terms they could accept.

The United States chose to put all its eggs into the Saigon basket, when evidently this was not the only basket in the country, nor necessarily the strongest one. Our counterinsurgency policy was to treat South Vietnam as a unitary centralized state in being, and to act accordingly. Thus, all military aid was channeled to Saigon's armed forces only, with nothing being done (until after the Tet 1968 offensive) to encourage the development of local defense groups, allied to local power elites. Mainly, however, I question the wisdom of having to this day avoided positively to enlist local power elites to the purpose of localized development, even channeling technical assistance and economic aid to them, directly, rather than giving it all to the central government.

Perhaps it would have been wiser more clearly to identify the character of the insurgency, and the multipolar political environment in which it took place. We had the option of making the willingness

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of the Saigon government to work with, rather than against, traditional power groups an accepted practice, in part using the leverage provided by our aid to the central government, in part using that aid directly to bolster the local power elites in their anti-insurgency posture.

In designing counterinsurgency policy, the planner might well consider whether the anti-insurgency strategy does not demand giving counterinsurgency itself the greatest priority, even if it means collaborating with, or seeking the collaboration of, non-insurgent groups that inherently are anti-insurgent, though anti-central government as well. If this is done, it would not create a downgrading of national institutions, which in any event in this kind of situation are not mature enough to function properly. It may mean a tactical diversification of the channels through which American assistance is given; it may mean working with a multiplicity of groups in a country, not just with the central administration. It need not mean a short-term weakening of the already weak and ineffectual central government. On the contrary, central administrations never are strengthened by giving them tasks or responsibilities which they are not equipped to fulfill, and cannot meet in the light of political reality.

For the longer run such a policy may lead a new state away from unitary centralized government towards a decentralized central system in which considerable local autonomy prevails. We Americans often think that the goal of every modernizing state should be to become

centralized and unitary. But this is not necessarily so. Even in homogeneous countries federalism and decentralization can be a source of strength (viz. the United States). For the heterogeneous new states federalism of some sort may well be the only reasonable direction for the growth of their political institutions. If this hypothesis is correct, then the prime character of counterinsurgency policy should be to find the lowest common denominator around which the diverse groups in the country can rally in resisting the armed insurgents, and the function of the American assistor then comes to nurture the common denominator, strengthen it as a cause, and formulate the counterinsurgency strategy around it.

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