

ADMINISTRATIVELY PRIVILEGED

US ALTERNATIVES IN VIETNAM

Conference sponsored by the Historical Evaluation and
Research Organization at the Industrial College of the
Armed Forces, Fort Lesley J. McNair, Washington, D. C.,
April 2-3-4, 1965

Historical Evaluation and Research Organization
2233 Wisconsin Avenue, N. W.
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PREFACE

The report that follows summarizes the results of a conference held by HERO with the encouragement of government officials. It reflects the considered thinking, at a time of impending grave policy decisions by the United States Government, of a number of acknowledged scholars and students of Asian affairs. (A list of those attending the conference is contained in Appendix A.) This summary of their deliberations and findings represents the result of three intensive days of discussion at the Industrial College of the Armed Forces, Fort Lesley J. McNair, Washington, D. C., through the courtesy of the Commandant of the College.

Invitations to this conference were issued with the understanding that representatives of policy branches of the US Government would be among the participants, to bring their specialized knowledge to bear on the deliberations. This participation was less than had been anticipated, to the disappointment of the members of the conference, despite their recognition of unexpected official conferences which caused this situation. Thanks in large part, however, to the frank and helpful participation of those officials who were able to attend, it is hoped that the results of the conference will be useful to the Government, and that it will provide suggestions, cautions, and recommendations that will facilitate the formulation of US policy in the immediate future and for the long term.

Insofar as possible, the report has been written to reflect the sense of the discussion during the conference. It is not intended to suggest that there was unanimity among the participants; there was, however, a substantial measure of agreement. Where differences of opinion were discernible, or expressed, every effort has been made to present opposing viewpoints, or differing shades of opinion, as precisely as possible. Comments of all participants are invited; these will be distributed when received.

The HERO staff wishes to express its appreciation for the enthusiastic and spirited participation of all who attended the conference. It would be impossible to single out any of the participants for special thanks, save for expressing our appreciation to Dr. Frank N. Trager and to Dr. Wesley Fishel--who prepared background papers for the conference which were distributed to all participants--and to the Honorable Kenneth T. Young, Jr., who stimulated discussion of some of the most urgent problems by his paper on "A New Strategy for Vietnam and Southeast Asia" (Appendix B, herewith).

Finally, nothing which appears in this report (other than Ambassador Young's paper) is to be attributed specifically to any conferee. This report has been seen by all who attended, but it was prepared by the HERO staff. The undersigned acknowledges that the ideas contained in this report were provided by the conference participants--but its format, and the way the ideas are presented, are his sole responsibility.

T. N. Dupuy
Executive Director

8 April 1965

US Alternatives in Vietnam

DISCUSSION

Basic Policy Goals

Current US objectives in the Indochinese peninsula may be stated as (1) the containment of Communist expansion in Southeast Asia, including denial of new satellites to Communist powers, and (2) maintenance of the independence of South Vietnam, both as a part of the first objective and to preserve the liberties of the people of South Vietnam.

US policy in carrying out these objectives is (1) to encourage and help the South Vietnamese people to preserve their own independence and to strengthen their country in all the economic, social, political, and military ways that make a society viable and secure, and (2) to take such additional military or other measures as may be required to achieve the objectives.

A number of excellent and carefully elaborated programs have been attempted as means for carrying out this policy and achieving these objectives, but these programs have clearly not been adequate. Partly because of mistakes or shortcomings in carrying them out, but primarily because of effective non-conventional military aggression against South Vietnam by forces supported by the Communist regime of North Vietnam, the means employed thus far have failed to carry out our policy and achieve our objectives.

There was a firm conference consensus in support of US objectives, as stated above. Some members felt substantial changes in basic policy might be necessary if the objectives were to be met, and all agreed that new ways of bringing the power and skills of the United States effectively to bear in support of the South Vietnamese struggle for independence are urgently needed.

Urgency of the Problem

It was made clear at the conference that measures to meet an urgent situation are required. The Viet Cong has now succeeded in virtually, though not necessarily permanently, cutting South Vietnam in half. Many areas in the 1st and 2nd Corps Areas have been abandoned to the Viet Cong. Infiltration of men and material has increased sharply. The imminent possibility of a humiliating defeat for the United States is very real. The appearance of a neutralist Vietnamese government, one that would demand US withdrawal, is a very possible outcome of increasing neutralist and defeatist sentiment in South Vietnam.

The urgency is heightened by our own air attacks against North Vietnam. These probably cannot go on indefinitely without eliciting some reaction. Whether such reaction results in negotiation or a bigger war, we must be prepared for it.

There are a number of measures discussed below that must be taken immediately if they are to be effective in time to save US objectives. Some have long been recommended, but not effectively carried out. Others involve new emphases or new combinations of techniques.

One group of proposals, headed Measures to Avert Defeat, provides a program of drastically reduced objectives that would prevent non-Communist influence from being pushed out of South Vietnam altogether and would provide a base from which recovery and the re-creation of an independent South Vietnamese nation could be built. This program is designed to meet desperate requirements.

On the other hand, some of the measures recommended, such as the regional development plans, place an emphasis on future development that may seem incongruous in view of the present urgency. It is essential to realize, however, that if our present immediate goals are met, and if the North Vietnamese regime ceases to intervene in South Vietnam, the struggle to achieve our policy objectives will be just beginning. We must put aside the customary American habit of watching the clock, of worrying about when we can pull out and forget the current crisis. The Communists never speak of getting out.

US Public Opinion

Before discussing the tools recommended for doing the necessary job in Vietnam, or the question of how it is to be done, it is important to recognize that very little can be done without the support of US public opinion, and that the relationship between US policy and US opinion is in a dangerously unhealthy condition. US opinion is not prepared for the length of time we are certainly going to have to spend in Vietnam, if we are to achieve our central policy objectives. It does not have the information to understand why we will be making the dramatic additional military commitments which will probably be required. It does not know that the effort on behalf of South Vietnam is an international effort, to an even greater extent than was the Korean War, with 31 countries now participating. The information on international participation is not even available from US sources to Asian specialists who are actively seeking it, although the facts are of course known within the US Government. Opinion-forming groups, such as Asian specialists at our universities who are sympathetic to US objectives, do not have adequate information on the military situation in Vietnam, on the nature of Viet Cong activity, or on the difficulty of the choices our government faces, to be able to support US policy effectively. Meanwhile, a well-organized, well-financed public opinion campaign, effectively fed with distorted information of the kind contained in overt Communist propaganda, is strenuously attempting to undermine US policy.

If nongovernmental US specialists on Asia were kept informed, the benefits for US opinion would be considerable. In addition, there should be publicizing of the Viet Cong's terrorist techniques and immediate propaganda emphasis on the thousands of refugees from Viet Cong terror in northern South Vietnam. Most publicity evoking compassion has been for US victims of the Embassy bombing and the attacks on US installations; insufficient attention has been given to the atrocities constantly perpetrated on the people of South Vietnam by the Viet Cong.

A juridical investigation, under international auspices, of Viet Cong terrorist atrocities would help correct inadequate publicity; it would also constitute an effective psychological warfare operation against the Viet Cong. Great Britain or the Republic of Vietnam itself could suggest such an investigation, to be carried out by international jurists, with Asian jurists

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active among the investigators. The findings of such an inspection should be publicized, and it should be put on record that retribution for documented atrocities would be made when circumstances permit.

It would also be extremely helpful in the development of sound US public opinion if US leadership could formulate and communicate to the public a definition of what constitutes a "win" in the kind of prolonged struggle in which we are now engaged. The public has accepted a series of stalemates and compromise settlements in Korea, Berlin, and Cuba. Under the best foreseeable circumstances, it will probably have to accept another such arrangement in Southeast Asia. Yet if the fighting we are doing in Vietnam merely gives the South Vietnamese people the chance to build an independent country, and stops Communist expansion in Southeast Asia, this will presumably be an American success. This concept of winning without overwhelming and obvious battlefield or conference table victory, must, however, be clarified and effectively presented.

Measures to Avert Defeat

Because of the extreme urgency of the situation, it was suggested, and agreed to by most of the conferees, that certain "basic undertakings," to prevent loss of the war before action to win it can become effective, should be established. This may require a reduced, intensified, clear-and-hold program. There are certain areas in South Vietnam that must be held under any circumstances. The designation and delineation of specific areas would have to be done by those in responsibility on the basis of intelligence data and careful analysis. Such areas would probably include the Saigon-Cap St. Jacques area, the Cam Ranh Bay area, the Pleiku-Kontum area, the Da Nang area, and the 17th parallel area, including a corridor across Laos to Thailand. This last area must be held, but is likely to be impossible to administer from Saigon. It would thus be a natural place to use international forces (see section below on "Internationalization of Effort"). The Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) and Popular Forces should be able to hold the other areas, with the ARVN having primary responsibility in the first phase.

An essential part of this program would be an extremely intensive economic and social development program in the areas or "enclaves" thus secured as basic undertakings. The Cam Rani

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Bay area has power available from a dam built there by the Japanese; it has sand suitable for a glass industry; and there is enough land nearby to permit this lightly populated area to be homesteaded. In such an area a really good militia could be developed, along with real security and a sense of loyalty and solidarity in the population.

This program means, basically, holding and consolidating the population centers. It means doing relatively little in the contested areas, beyond letting the people there know we wish we could do more. It means conducting "spoiling" operations as much as possible in currently Viet Cong areas to interfere with their consolidation efforts. The emphasis on saturation programs of development is especially important, both as a prerequisite for ultimate political and military success, and because North Vietnamese and Viet Cong propaganda will paint such a program as withdrawal into Dien Bien Phu's.

Measures to Carry Out US Policy Within South Vietnam

Whether or not the extreme, last-ditch measures just described are required, much more will have to be done, both now and later, to achieve US objectives. The measures described below may be considered long-range if circumstances prohibit their being carried out now. Insofar as possible, they should be put into effect immediately. In cases where conferees held differing views, this has been indicated.

Roles of the Vietnamese Government
and the United States

Two positions on the currently desirable command structure for the war effort in Vietnam were expressed. On the one hand, a strong plea was made for keeping command and responsibility in the hands of the Vietnamese government. This plea was based on the conviction that the Vietnamese could still do the job, with effective US support and encouragement, and that if their responsibility was lessened their effort would inevitably slacken, leaving the United States with full responsibility--and "colonialism" onus--for running the war.

The other view expressed was that the time had come when military effectiveness demanded a unified military command. Such a command structure should have, it was argued, a Vietnamese

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general in command, a unified staff, and one fully integrated chain of command from highest to lowest levels.

Whatever the command structure, a number of specific measures can and should be taken.

Rotation of US personnel has been too rapid, and the conferees felt strongly that even 18 months was an inadequate tour for most advisers. There was also agreement that there is an unnecessarily and undesirably large number of American personnel in Saigon. Opinion was also expressed that the American staff in Saigon is too high ranking to function effectively in a truly advisory role. We must have fewer people in Vietnam, and have them there longer. Most Americans, it was felt, would be willing to stay as long as they are needed in Vietnam, except for family considerations. It would be desirable to have some of the most effective personnel assigned to Vietnam for the duration of the emergency, on a voluntary basis, with men in combat areas rotated regularly into Saigon for rest, and so that their experience can be made available there.

It was also urged that one way to improve effectiveness among American advisers would be to have Vietnamese leaders and officers each request an American (military or civilian) whom they knew and wanted to work with. This should be done from the command level in Saigon to the advisers in the provinces and battalions in the field. Most people who have been in Vietnam want to go back; it is now extremely hard for these people to get back, no matter how effective they have been, or how actively they try to return. Men chosen in the way suggested, and others with a willingness to serve and the skills needed, especially in political organization and community development, could be the manpower for a Vietnam Project, small in size, but comparable to the wartime Manhattan Project in total commitment to the job at hand, however long it may take. Such people, again civilian and military, should perhaps be incorporated into an elite corps of specialists in all aspects of resurgency.

Granting more initiative to responsible US officials and officers in Saigon would probably both improve their effectiveness and reduce their numbers. There appear to be demands for unnecessarily detailed reports from Washington, so that much of the US personnel effort in Saigon is directed toward satisfying Washington requirements, rather than helping to fight the war and assist the Vietnamese Government.

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Decentralization of Vietnamese government activities is also urgently needed. It is essential to get good Vietnamese officials out of Saigon and other cities and into the provinces and to give them the opportunity to exercise initiative there. Substantial pay differentials for work in the provinces, long recommended, must be provided, along with whatever other incentives are necessary. Work in the provinces now requires real sacrifices of comfort, safety, prestige, income, and career advancement that must be compensated for.

Vietnamese military operations still suffer from failures that have long been recognized, notably failure to fight at night and poor troop behavior toward Vietnamese civilians. It was strongly urged that rewards must be given to officers and men who perform well in these respects, that those who do poorly must suffer, and that Vietnamese commanders and officials in Saigon must not impede the carrying out of these rewards and punishments. The political and psychological difficulties of this were recognized, but efforts to overcome these should be made.

There was disagreement as to the introduction of major US ground forces into Vietnam; this disagreement was based largely on differing estimates of the urgency of the need. The critical impact of large-scale US troop involvement on US public opinion was stressed, as was its impact on US world-wide commitments; it was also emphasized that the Vietnamese should fight their own war as much as possible, and should be assisted by internationalized forces when possible. If US ground troops must be used, they should be used in combat roles, however, as the effect on Vietnamese morale of US troops in a static role in defense of US installations would be harmful.

As to the government of South Vietnam itself, it is unrealistic to expect a strong or stable government under the conditions of prolonged war and civil strife now existing. For the time being, at least, there is a promising government that includes a number of dedicated, able younger men. Since there is support in this government for the political-social-economic work so much needed at the local level, we should now push these programs as much as circumstances allow.

Rural Resurgency Programs

The word resurgency was strongly suggested for the local political-social-economic-military measures commonly called

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counterinsurgency. The conferees generally accepted this term, which, it was pointed out, has a positive rather than negative connotation, and also translates well into Asian languages, as counterinsurgency does not.

Although in some cases military action must come first in rural programs, simply for reasons of elementary security, the emphasis must always be on nonmilitary measures as soon and as much as possible. Rural Vietnamese do not like uniforms, it was pointed out, and when possible the first government contact with a liberated village should be by a civilian. If military clearing is necessary, there should be propaganda saturation first with loudspeaker and leaflets, followed by military clearing, provision of policy security, and the organization of the village for security by the local population, stimulated and assisted by an outside organizer. Community services should be provided as soon as possible, bringing in doctors, nurses, teachers, and agricultural specialists.

The greatest personnel need in this program is for organizers, people who can do "precinct-type" work in helping village communities organize to provide round-the-clock security for themselves. Such a security program would include effective local "minutemen" for local defense. Vietnamese villagers have a 400-year-old tradition of self-government which should be respected and can be used, but they need help in taking the initiative under existing conditions. A program should be set up for recruiting organizers of this kind in the United States and elsewhere to inspire, train, and work with Vietnamese in village organization. (Such individuals might well be included in the elite specialist corps suggested earlier.) This total program is the best answer possible to Viet Cong terrorism, the hardest problem the Vietnamese face in the countryside.

Certain social and administrative reforms must also be carried out immediately, it was agreed. Whatever the economic worth of land reform, it has great popular appeal. As a minimum measure, the land in areas largely controlled by the Viet Cong should be declared to belong to the peasants who live on it and till it. This is a conservative measure, since the landlords have no practical control over the land in any case. There should also be no attempt made by the government to collect taxes in these areas. These steps should have been carried out earlier, but should be done now for whatever propaganda value they may still have.

The War Outside South Vietnam

US Action

Three distinct and contrasting views regarding US-Vietnamese military action against North Vietnam were put forth at the conference:

1. That we must punish the Hanoi regime until infiltration of troops and material is stopped. No nonmilitary inducements should be offered to Hanoi until it begins clearly to reduce its involvement in the south. At the same time all other measures necessary to win the war in the south must be pressed with the utmost urgency, to include introduction of more US ground forces, and the establishment of a unified command over Vietnamese, US, and other international contingents.

2. That punishment of the Hanoi regime by continued air strikes should be accompanied by (a) offers of economic and political benefits--the traditional "carrot and stick" approach; and (b) measures to retain flexibility and continued freedom of action; such measures include imaginative political action in South Vietnam, increased internationalization of assistance to South Vietnam, and military and economic measures to enhance regionalism.

3. That we have much to lose by indefinitely continuing air strikes on North Vietnam. The strikes thus far are justifiable, but a prolonged, intensive effort, especially if made without accompanying positive offers, could easily drive Hanoi into the position of an outright Chinese satellite, despite continuing traditional Vietnamese suspicion of the Chinese. Our continuing bombing can also harden anti-American opinion inside China, destroying some of the recent hopeful developments, particularly among Chinese youth; it could also jeopardize whatever US-Soviet detente may exist.

Chinese Reaction

The opinion was offered that the Chinese Communist leadership generally regards what is going on now in Vietnam as a gain for itself. In spite of being left open to the charge that it is itself a paper tiger, unable to deliver help to North Vietnam, China feels it is gaining by waiting and letting us struggle with our involvement and difficulties in Vietnam. The