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august 28, 1965

DANANG, SOUTH VIET NAM--For years, politically conscious American officials, including former Ambassador Maxwell D. Taylor argued against sending American ground combat troops to fight in Viet Nam.

These officials argued the Americans would be closely identified with the former French colonialist position, that the war could easily become an American vs. Vietnamese--and racially white vs. yellow--struggle.

As the military situation in Vietnam continued to sharply deteriorate, the need for American military strength on the ground forced even Ambassador Taylor to reluctantly shift his position.

Now, seven months after the arrival of the first American combat troops, some of these long-held political fears are beginning to materialize in this U.S. Marine Corps area of responsibility some 350 miles north of Saigon.

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The Marines currently are submerged in multi-fronted political frictions with the Vietnamese civilians; with the Vietnamese government officials from the highest level to the village level; and with other American agencies. Seven months after the initial arrival of the Marines, a special committee of all the heads of the American agencies operating in the Danang area has finally been formed. This includes the Marines, the U.S. Army (advisorys to the Vietnamese), the United States Information Service (USIS) and the American economic aid mission, plus the American Consulate. No representative of the Vietnamese government has yet been named.

"I went to an orientation session in Saigon where all the leading American military, economic and political experts in Saigon told us about the need for civic action for the Vietnamese people," one Marine Corps officer explained. "I asked them if the American leaders in Saigon had any coordinated plan to use American tactical units for civic action among the population.

"You'll flip when I tell you that these important American officials said 'no,' the officer continued.

(Source: 1)

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One key area of conflicting approaches to the political problem has arisen between the Marines and the U.S. Agency for International Development/

"The USAID approach is to give American aid goods to the Vietnamese government in Saigon and then this filters down to the Vietnamese district chief and finally to the village chief," one Marine officer explained. "But, the Marines want to get the goods--especially for refugees in our area--into the field immediately and we can do it quicker than the Vietnamese government.

"USAID so far has refused to budge from their position, so the Marines have to get all their medical supplies through Marine Corps logistical system and this is about to run out. We can't get American relief goods for the refugees from USAID so we had to get them from the Catholic Relief Service--which gets their emergency relief goods from the U.S. government too. But even their supplies aren't enough to meet the refugee problem--and furthermore it identifies the Marines with the Catholic Church--and we're operating in a militantly Buddhist and anti-Catholic area." (Source 1)

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Frictions between the Marines and the highest ranking Vietnamese military--civilian military and government officials centers around the expansion of the Marine Corps "tactical area of responsibility." The Marines have a 200 square mile TAOR, which has been defined as "a zone of action in which the Marines are free to conduct tactical operations without further coordination with the Vietnamese armed forces." (Source: 2)

But, to operate outside this TAOR requires prior coordination with the Vietnamese armed forces, specifically the I Corps Command, headed by Brig. Gen. Nguyen Chanh Thi, who is considered a jealous, militant advocate of Vietnamese nationalism.

In one instance, the Marines intelligence officer received word that 400-some Vietnamese peasants outside of the Marine TAOR wanted to come in behind the Marine lines, but were afraid to do so because of Viet Cong terrorism. The Marines conducted a military operation outside their TAOR to rescue these peasants; but in the meantime, General Thi specifically ordered his province chief not to allow the operation, until the incoming refugees had first been screened to eliminate the Viet Cong sympathizers.

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"The poor province chief was caught between a headstrong Marine and his headstrong general," one Marine officer explained.

The province chief sided with the Marines, but he was fired. And when the refugees came to the Vietnamese hamlets within the Marine security zone, the Vietnamese village chief refused to welcome them; 25 per cent of them returned to the Viet Cong-controlled area.

In another instance, on the southern flank of the Marine defensive perimeter around the Danang air base, the Marines requested and received permission from the Vietnamese authorities to send a reconnaissance patrol across the river outside the boundaries of their TAOR. But the recon patrol suffered considerable casualties and had to be reinforced by two Marine companies, who also suffered considerable casualties.

"By then the Marine ~~o~~ attitude was we've been hit so badly trying to take this village, we're going to stay here," one Marine officer explained. But General Thi said he opposed this idea, since he had no authorization from the Vietnamese government in Saigon. After securing that village named Duong Son, which the Marines hoped to turn into a model hamlet, they attempt~~ed~~ to take control of the neighboring village called Cam Ne, which lead to the infamous house-burning incident there several weeks later.

"I can tell you I have lots of headaches now," on local Vietnamese government official explained." (Source 6)

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In another instance, on the northern perimeter, the Marines wanted to expand their TAOR by several thousand meters to include an Esso oil storage area. The Vietnamese-authorities and the Marines compromised; the Marines were given security responsibility for two bridges en route to the Esso depot; the Vietnamese reinforced the Esso storage area with two companies of local militiamen. But, then the Viet Cong launched a diversionary mortar-internal sabotage attack and blew up the costly Esso storage area; the Marines were still confused as to whether the Viet Cong had slipped through their patrol lines, or had skirted them, and fearing the two bridges within their TAOR we would be blown up, had to reinforce them with another Marine company. (Source: 4)

A four-way political tug-of-war has developed between the Marines, the American military Command in Saigon, the low-ranking Vietnamese officials and Vietnamese villagers. The problem centers around claims to be paid to the villagers when the Marines establish a fixed position, such as a company headquarters, in the heart of a densely populated area.

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"The Marine battalion commanders feel that the Marines should pay the villagers for leasing their land and for inconveniencing them," one Marine officer explained (Source: 1). "They believe these are the people that should be for us, rather than shooting us in the back. So, the Vietnamese district chief personally measured off the land with the villagers and they submitted claims which the Marine Corps promised they would pay.

"The Marines want to pay these people on the spot," he continued. "But Mr. (Robert) McNamara when he was here said 'We're not going to buy the battlefield,' according to the military officials in Saigon; and the Saigon command (Military Assistance Command headed by Gen. William C. Westmoreland) interpretes that literally and won't give us the money to pay the villagers. So, the Marines promised the villagers the claims money weeks ago; we still haven't paid and we now look as inefficient to them as the Vietnamese government."

But the price listing the Marines told the Vietnamese district they would pay is not the same as the Vietnamese district told the villagers the Marines would pay--the Marines worked through the district chief to deal with the villagers--and the villagers were totally happy about the prices listings.

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The Marines promised to pay the villagers up to 500 piastres (\$7) for fruit trees on the leased land and up to 1000 piastres (\$15) for "clumps of bamboo"--a clump has yet to be defined. But, in the translation the villagers said they were to be given only four piastres (seven cents) for a banana tree, "But that's not enough because it takes years for a banana tree to bear fruit and four piastres doesn't repay us.

One of the most basic complaints of the Marines, especially those operating in the villages, is the lack of competent interpreters; the Marines believe this is partly to blame for the misunderstandings. "There's a real shortage of interpreters at the company level where we have the most contact with the villagers," one Marine company commander explained. "There's not enough good English-speaking Vietnamese to go around. Some of the Marines in my company took a two-week crash course in Vietnamese before coming here, but it's not good enough. In addition, most of the time we operate with the Vietnamese irregular units, and few of them speak English; while the regular Vietnamese units, like their Marines do speak English. But, there's nothing we can do about this."