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64A Hong Thap Tu

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SAIGON—The moment the first American combat troops set foot on Vietnamese soil two years ago, fierce in-fighting simmered within the American establishment here on the concept of how they should be used.

The in-fighting and conflicting directions in fact, the strategic dilemma within the American establishment here continued throughout 1965 and erupted at the highest level in mid-October, 1966 with a bitter row between Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge and Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara during his last visit to Vietnam, before the Manila Conference.

The in-fighting persisted first as a clash of conflicting concepts within the American military establishment—between the U.S. Army and the Marines—then within the civilian establishment here, since many of the employees of the American civilian agencies are either former or detached military officers. But, more generally, the in-fighting here is described as military vs. civilian conflicts on the ^{DIRECTION} approach of the war.

The simplified version of the conflict hinged on two points: the Marines ^{Alliance} civilian wanted a de-conventionalisation of the war on the military side and, in some cases, a de-Americanization of the war on the political side, the direction of the ^{of these} management of the war is now the reserve. Second, to curb the hit-and hide "strategic mobility" of the Communist Viet Cong guerrilla, the Marine-civilian alliance sought to control, pacify and secure the Vietnamese population from which they believed the guerrilla gained their strength; the U.S. Army wanted to nullify the "strategic mobility" of the guerrilla with their own tactical mobility derived from helicopters, armored personnel carriers, and quick-reaction artillery and jet airpower.

The conflict began when the U.S. Marines, the first American combat group

units to land in Vietnam, started to secure the populated areas around the strategic Danang airbase, 350 miles north of Saigon.

They employed the "nuclear and hold" tactics, in which American Marine units provided a permanent outer screen around "priority" populated villages, and then the Vietnamese para-military units and Vietnamese civilian agencies, backed by American civilians, would along with the Marines provide civic action and pacification activities to ~~call~~ ^{cut} out Communist infra-structure. They assumed their main enemy was the Viet Cong guerrilla and political cadre which maintained control over the villagers; their second enemy was the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese main force units of battalions and regiments which abounded in the non-populated jungles.

The second unit to arrive in Vietnam was the 173rd Airborne Brigade (Separate) which was to exemplify the U.S. Army approach to the war. The unit was first sent to secure the jet-length airbase of Bien Hoa, ~~80 miles north of Saigon~~ ^{80 miles north of Saigon}, but by July, 1965, they used Bien Hoa simply as a staging area for "search and destroy" operations into the Viet Cong jungled stronghold of D-Zone. The U.S. Army approach assumed that the primary enemy was the main force units of Viet Cong battalions and regiments--and now divisions--and that unless they were eradicated the villages and hamlets would never maintain enough of their own security forces to be free of Communist guerrilla and political cadre and tax collectors.

In short, the Army approach maintained, as one Army officer explained, "If we knock out the main force, the guerrilla will get scared and be quiet. The war is then a manageable problem."

The Marines said, however, "If we knock out the guerrilla ^{3/4} that control the population and the villages--we'll let the North Vietnamese stay in the jungle for twenty years, bomb them and hope they get malaria."

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The Army viewed the war as more of a convention, or at best sub-conventional conflict, with American units pitched ~~as~~ versus Communist units; the Marines viewed the war as a counter-insurgency effort designed to secure and then pacify the villages.

Throughout the remainder of 1965 and 1966, the feud continued between the Army and the Marines. On one occasion, for example, the feelings became so bitter that an American Army colonel refused to allow a Marine officer brief Secretary ~~Mr~~ of Defense Robert McNamara (an Army general over-ruled the colonel). The Army is largely in charge of the joint (that is, inter-service) Military Assistance Command, responsible for running the whole American side of the military war within South Vietnam, while the Marines are responsible for the five northern provinces known as I Corps, bordering Laos and the demilitarized zone on the 17th parallel.

By October, 1966--as battle plans were being drawn up for 1967--the American military staff planners realized that the Army concept ~~2~~ had largely failed--for while they had killed, captured and wounded tens of thousands of Communists, the Communist strength continued to mushroom both from the invisible invasion from North Vietnam as well as from local recruitment from the village population which the Communists largely controlled.

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Conversely, however, the Marines also had failed to achieve any remarkable ~~success~~ success, first because during the Buddhist crisis in their tactical area in the spring of 1966, the entire Vietnamese military organization and administration had virtually caved in with the removal of Vietnamese corps commander, General Nguyen Chanh Thi (whom the Marines liked and respected immensely, but neither the American Army nor civilians did). Second, however, the Communists had moved elements of two divisions along the demilitarized zone by July and threatened to over-run the northernmost province of Quang Tri. The U. S. joint command in Saigon ordered more than a division of U. S. Marines to the DMZ--though the ~~Mar~~ Marines did not think the Communist threat was that severe--and as a consequence the villages that the Marines had been protecting outside of Danang were spread too thin to maintain adequate security.

By 1966, the American civilian agencies ~~where~~ became more vocal and, unknowingly, adopted the American Marine viewpoint and formed a loose ~~conceptual~~ alliance with them. During 1965, the American civilian agencies--like the Vietnamese government and armed forces--were largely on the defensive, watching with astonishment the American military build-up and attempting to soften the adverse political-economic-social repercussions of the upheaval--such as the inflation and housing of the American troops in the cities.

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In February, 1966, President ~~Lyden~~ Lyndon Johnson dramatically called the Honolulu Conference with leaders of the ~~V~~ South Vietnamese government to launch the "other war," essentially the war of pacification and economic betterment for the countryside, under a plan already worked out by General Nguyen Duc Thang, minister of rural reconstruction. The historic announcements, however, were soon forgotten as the urban population in the northern provinces not only sparked an uprising which ~~was~~ ^{ignited} nearly toppled the pro-American government of Prime Minister Nguyen Cao Ky, but also sparked the open mutiny of some of the Vietnamese armed forces against their own government.

By October of 1966, with the Manila Conference in the offing, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara arrived in Saigon and the result was the most Significant if not violent confrontation to date between the Army-Marine and the civilian-military conflicts. Lodge was the exponent of the civilian-Marine alliance; he, believing the most dangerous Communist threat comes from the guerrilla and political cadre, wanted a min maximum number of American troops deployed to secure the villages from which the Communist infrastructure would be sifted. McNamara and the American military leaders wanted the American combat units to be employed in a more offensive role against the Communist "hard-hat" main-force units, mostly in the some of the 90 Communist base areas such as the jungles of Zone C and D north of ~~S~~ Saigon.

Reliable sources here report that the discussion between Lodge and McNamara reached heated proportions; at one time, according to these sources, Lodge refused to answer three telephone calls from ~~Robert~~ McNamara. McNamara left Saigon earlier than scheduled, cancelled an airport news conference, and "in general he left in a huff and is still in a huff," these sources report.