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THE LULU AT HONOLULU

SAIGON, VIETNAM--Amidst the blamy, honey atmosphere of the Honolulu Conference in early February, President Lyndon B. Johnson wagged his finger at the clusters of American and Vietnamese officials, and said to Prime Minister Nguyen Cao Ky, "we'll get together in June to see how many coon skins you've nailed to the wall."

Later, one Vietnamese minister semi-faustically retorted that "perhaps a tiger skin would be more appropriate."

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Little did those present realize the enormity of the changes that would engulf Vietnam by June--changes determining whether indeed, Prime Minister Ky would still be in his post, whether his hard-line anti-Communist military junta would still be in position, whether his two-year plan for victory would even have finished before it began, and whether a neutralist, pro-Communist government would have seized power which would make the initial step in the evolutionary, eventual process towards an internal negotiation with the Communists--and whether the American military presence would still be accepted or "totally chunked out" of Vietnam.

The Honolulu Conference was historic, but for none none of the reasons cited in its famous Declaration and for none of the statements made in the optimistic press sessions.

The key decision, made secretly and yet to be officially announced, was the desire of President Johnson to hold elections for a Vietnamese legislative assembly "as soon as possible," instead of in late 1967, as Prime Minister Ky's two-year program called for.

This key decision was the "lulu" of Honolulu, or as one Western diplomat explained, "it should be called the Hollow-lulu Conference--it was a lulu, but it was hollow." Whether deliberately or inadvertently, the President in his decision effected internally within South Vietnam to toss the decision-making powers of the government into the pro-neutralist elements, rather than the hard-line anti-Communist elements.

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The militant Buddhist- religious-political organisation, heavily penetrated by pro-neutralist and pro-Communist elements, seized upon the President's decision, pinned both the American officialdom and Vietnamese government to that decision--and by doing so opened a second political front which openly and deliberately assisted Communists first front--the National Liberation Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam, which is the political backbone of the Communist armed forces.

In terms of American national interest in Vietnam, the effect was such that the President was more interested in ending the war than in winning it; in short, the policy to negotiate with the Communists rather than to defeat them.

"It means simply that America is now longer a first-rate power, but is on its way to becoming a second-rate one," a reliable military expert explained. "The Communists will be ~~in~~ in India before you've finished negotiating in Vietnam. 2"

The reasons for the President's decision are subject to only educated guesses from the Saigon vantage point; however, unkind they may be, these are some of the points of speculation.

A Western diplomat: The President wanted early elections in Vietnam because he has his own elections to worry about.

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A Vietnamese intellectual intellectual: The President's desire for early elections was simply a maneuver to stuff a towel in the backs of the American doves to shut them up.

A worried official, who attended the Honolulu Conference: No American had the guts to tell the President he was wrong.

Whatever the reasons, it was clear to political observers here that the President was operating in his traditional two-steps forward, one step backward approach to the problem of Vietnam. The President--and he alone--decided to take the two gigantic strategic steps, both in measured slow-motion, first to bomb North Vietnamese military targets and routes of communication and second to commit American ground troops to the southern republic.

The one backward step, however, was the President's peace offensive, which although it was admittedly mandatory in terms of international and American public opinion, served to pull the rug out from under the war effort in the South.

Likewise, at the Honolulu Conference, the President openly declared war on the social, economic and political inadequacies within the South, and attempted to open a second non-military front, which long overdue. He then took the second demonstrative step of dispatching Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey to Vietnam to drive the message home into the minds of the South Vietnamese people--which only a partial success. But, at Honolulu, he made the one step backward--the attempt to hold elections within the South. This step opened up the political Pandora's box of unprecedented political intrigue by the pre-neutralist elements, and covert Communist agents.

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Neither Vietnam nor the anti-Communist war will ever fully recover from that decision.

For, the President, while overwhelmingly embracing Prime Minister Ky--for the whole world to witness--at the Honolulu Conference, then proceeded to pull the rug from under Ky's famous two-year program and Ky's sole political basis of support in the country--the military junta.

Originally, the President is known to have ~~expos~~ expressed the desire to hold elections for the national legislative assembly in June of this year. High-placed Vietnamese sources ~~indiat~~ indicated that Ky talked the President out of that ~~decisionk~~ decision, which would have proved ~~and~~ politically disastrous ~~in~~ within the South, and they compromised to hold "elections as soon as possible," perhaps in early 1967. While Ky articulated the promise, however, he had little intention of carrying it out--first because he was committed to his two-year program internally and second because he genuinely believed that the pro-neutralist, pro-Communist elements could seize legal power within the country.

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Currently, was forced to
~~It was here,~~ however, ~~that~~ Ky himself is now attempting to
compromise with the militant Buddhists to telescope his two-year program,
which broadly attempts ~~to~~^{ed} by late 1967 to have secured militarily
and controlled politically seventy six percent of the Vietnamese
population, simultaneously, pushing forward on his social,
economic reforms in the urban centers, while at the central
level, a national constitution would have been drafted, submitted
to a national referendum of some sort--and by late 1967, a national
legislative assembly would have been freely elected, which could
conceivably had the power to name a new government to replace Ky
and his War Cabinet.

If Ky could have accomplished even partially this ambitious
program, he would have achieved a dramatic, internal political
victory of sorts.

The danger of telescoping this program into less than two
years--as the President advocated--was a fairly simple, though
vague mathematical calculation. Vietnamese government officials
~~currently~~^{currently} estimated that they controlled politically and militarily
roughly fifty percent of the Vietnamese population, mostly in the
cities and towns and a thin swathe of ~~villages~~ the surrounding
villages.

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By the end of 1967, the government officials hoped to have expanded their grip on the rural countryside and pushed the Viet Cong Communist military units and political cadre out of the populous valleys and villages. At that time, free elections for a national legislative council could be held--but still the anti-Communist military junta would have indirectly vetoed any known or suspected Communist political agents from running as candidates, although conceivably voters living in Communist-controlled areas would have been granted the right to vote--but only for a non-Communist slate. The ten-man military junta is not only the legal basis of the current government--but it also holds the significant position of deciding future governments. But, in the midst of the current Vietnamese political crisis, it is debatable whether the junta in its anti-Communist form and position of power will survive.

By speeding up this election procedure, which the President advocated, would have thus proved disastrous in the view of the anti-Communist government.

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In short, the premise of the President's x desire to speed up the election x process appeared to rest on his appraisal it was too late to win the war; the reluctance on the part of Prime Minister Ky was the assumption that it was too early to begin negotiations with the Communists internally.

The Honolulu Conference clearly brought into focus that Vietnam was no longer Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara's war—it was clearly ~~LB~~ clearly LBJ's war. And this appeared, from this vantage point, to tip the scales at the Washington level from the Pentagon's hawk-like position towards the more moderate pro-negotiation position of the President. The hawk-dove controversy in Washington is mirrored here in an kaleidoscope of disunity among the American agencies here—the Agency for International Development (AID), the Central Intelligence Agency, the American Embassy, the military-civilian Joint United States Public Affairs Office (JUSPAO)—and the powerful military machine under the command of General William C. Westmoreland.

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These American agencies, and even the military command, are to act in support of the Vietnamese government in the tasks of pacifying the rural areas and promoting social-economic-political development there plus in the urban areas. But, the American agencies, in such a disarray of disunity, inf in-fighting, intrigue and counter-intrigue, have only served to ~~perpetuate~~ magnify, rather than to nullify or solidify, the Vietnamese official in-fighting in government circles. Washington's hawk-dove controversy indirectly sparks the American in-ifhg in-fighting in Saigon, but the points of inter-agency conflict more specifically deal with the tactical approaches to Vietnamese problems--and which American agency should call the shots on the American side.

Some of the descriptive comments about this semi-paralysis of the American bureaucratic operations in Vietnam are rather alarming, when compared to the gravity of the internal crisis and the enormity of the American commitment of prestige, power and blood to Vietnam.

One Western diplomat: This isn't so much of an American war; it's another American civil war.

One American civilian expert: The American officials have put their minds in mothballs. Just like the Communists, they parrot back their latest Party line dispatches to Washington--all of which are based on over-optimism and self-delusion.

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An American tech technician: The American bureaucracy here is like a dinosaur--with a big lumbering body and a small brain.

An American military officer: "The American civilian officials are careers careerists who come to a country for two-year tours and intrigue and intrigue, without realizing what they're doing. They make promises of support to the Vietnamese--subconsciously, because the Vietnamese are looking for these promises. They build empires like children play with toy blocks. Then, in two years they go to another post, without knowing they've played cat and mouse games with other people's countries.

In short, the overwhelming impression and fear of some American officials, plus pro-American allies here, is that in Vietnam--and other wars like this in the future--the American governmental processes abroad are substantially inadequate to meet the political--little own the military--threat of a well disciplined, well superbly indoctrinated dictatorial Communist machine that is attempting to seize power with the most subtle, refined political skills.

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A descriptive microcosm of the bureaucratic snafu within the American official ranks was displayed at the Warrenton session-- the prelude ill little-noticed prelude to the Honolulu Conference-- when in early January the heads of the American agencies ~~amtxx~~ or their representatives were recalled to Washington to hold consultations on the Vietnamese pacification plan with the Far East Asia chiefs of various American superiors in Washgint Washington.

The session began at 9 a.m. on Saturday, January 9, in a former red schoolhouse at the Defense Department retreat of Warrenton, in the fox-hunting country of Virginia fifty miles from Washington. One of the basic points of discussion: should the American officialdom in Saigon set up an "integrated operational command" which would give coordinating and substantive powers to one American to coordinate the American military effort, with the American ~~m~~ civilian effort, which would in turn have to be coordinated with a weak Vietnamese pacification force.

The answer seemed obviously yes, for there was a desperate need at the Saigon level for authoritative American management on the key question of pacification.

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But, then the classical American inter-agency conflict arose-- would the American military or the American civilians run the effort? Underlying this question was the basic tactical approach to running the war--and whether the eventual American policy was to negotiate or to win.

One American argued, "We may be a relatively short distance away from some sort of negotiation. In the course or aftermath aftermath we may have to less our military presence--and it will be easier to maintain a non-combattant civilian presence. Hence, the pacification effort should, for example, stress civilian American civilian police advisers to assist the Vietnamese police rather than American military adviser advisers to the Vietnamese paramilitary units. This is debated all the time within American official circles. Hence, if we develop pacification on the civilian side, the Americans can maintain their strength in Vietnam longer than under a military establishment. This is an important fundamental."

But, against this background, once the discussion started, differences of opinion and approach began to emerge. The meeting was conducted under the co-chairmanship of Saigon's deputy ambassador William Porter and Leonard Unger, former ambassador to Laos and head of the Vietnam Coordinating Council in Washington.

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The line-up of the conflict revealed this:

The Washington officials who wanted the line integrated operational command were the White House representatives, the Department of Defense representatives, the U. S. Agency for International Development. The Central Intelligence Agency at the Washington level flatly refused to join. The State Department officials at the Washington level attempted to compromise "or to dilute" the issue.

At the Saigon level, however, further splits in viewpoint arose. Though the Washington Defense Department officials were favored the line integrated command, the Saigon military representatives "took a protectionist view--because they had the most power (i. e. the power of troops) and didn't want to give it up." Though the Washington AID officials favored line integration, Saigon AID Director Charles Mann was against it. "He likes playing soldier and the integrated command would have taken his toys away," according to one reliable source. Ironically, Mann's Saigon subordinate in charge of pacification, Sam Wilson, violently disagreed and attempted vainly to push through the issue. Barry Zorthian, Saigon director of the psychological warfare operation, known as the Joint United States Public Affairs Office (an offshoot of United States Information Service) was for the command, "but then proportionately he had the least power to lose." The American Embassy officials ~~in~~ from Saigon, including co-chairman Porter, aided with the State Department superiors and "diluted the whole issue."

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Saigon CIA officials sided with their Washington CIA superiors and refused to join the integrated operational command.

"The co-chair co-chairmen were always moving on to another topic, while the pro-instr pro-integrationists tried to push on with the discussion," according to one reliable source. "In the end, they flicked at the issue like brushing against a hot stove. They were all too politi polite to each other when they should have had a pushing, shoving showdown."

After two and half days of discussion, this key decision was shelved.

These basic dev divisions are now being a reflected 15,000 miles away in remote Vietnamese divisions. The basic CIA position in Washington, the CIA representatives in the northern provinces of Vietnam, responsible for training helping to train the important Vietnamese pacification cadre, refuse to sit on a Vietnamese-American council with the U. S. Marines. These northern provinces, known as the first Vietnamese military corps, are currently the scene of disorderly public rebellion in the urban rear base areas were 40,000 American Marines Marines--yet the American Embassy in Saigon doesn't bother to inform the Marine Marines of the key decisions political decision that their Vietnamese commanding general had been removed from his post in to their area.

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A month later, the Honl Honolulu Conference was held. The decision was finally made--no integrated & operational center. But deputy ambassador Porter, who ironically had skirted the issue at the Warrenton session, was named to the "special post" of coordinating "all aspects of the work of the United States in Vietnamese government projects...to implement the pacification program advocated at Honl Honolulu." But, the appointment authorized too little power much too late in the game.

Less than a month after Honolulu, Vietnam was engulfed in an unprecedented political crisis awesomely displaying the Communist subversion on the one hand plus latent anti-Americanism on the other hand. In the face of this rising political threat, the Vietnamese government, even with all the image-making of Honolulu, was too weak to govern; the American officials in Washington and Saigon were too confused to lead. The anti-Communist, American position in Vietnam was gradually sliding into one of either camouflaged retreat through negotiations or total humiliating defeat. While victory is still possible, but it is forgotten. For the Honolulu Conference was the historic prelude to the Final American Snafu in Vietnam.