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august 10, 1965

DANANG, SOUTH VIET NAM--The concept of the Johnson Administration to use American combat Marines to fortify this strategic enclave here along the eastern seaboard of South Viet Nam is beginning to fail before it has barely begun.

Unless there is a drastic change in American military tactics, and more important, unless there is the dramatic, immediate formulation of an American political strategy for South Vietnam, American faces the prospect of a total and humiliating defeat in the coming years.

Before the arrival of the American combat Marines--following the February bombing raids against North Viet Nam--the American political-military position acted in support of the Vietnamese government and Vietnamese armed forces. With the arrival of the American Marines, however, the total American prestige military and political prestige was laid on the line--for the whole world to see--in an attempt to win a war that was progressively being lost.

Now the gamble of using American combat Marines here, in the most important of enclave areas is itself failing.

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The orders from Washington to the U.S. Marines in this enclave area are neither to win the war nor to secure the villagers, but to defend the Danang airbase, which is of strategic importance since a number of the bombing raids to North Vietnam are launched from here. However, the Marines are literally "knocking ourselves out," as one of them explained, to win the war, secure the people and to defend the airbase. More than 9000 US Marines--are responsible for defending the 200 square mile perimeter around the airbase.

Yet, there is no total security. Last week, a U.S. Marine sentry at the Marine headquarters at the edge of the Danang airbase was shot twice through the chest from a house across the street. He died.

"The security must be total," one reliable source explained. "Security for 364 nights a year is not enough; it must be for 365 nights or else the Communist terrorists will assassinate the government officials and intimidate the villagers."

Even more difficult than securing the people, is finding them. In village after village which the U.S. Marines sweep through only the elders and children remain. "We have lost the middle generation," one Marine captain explained. In one village south of Danang, the population dropped from 1200 to 400 once the Marines arrived and attempted to secure it.

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The one most basic fundamental which makes the war in South Viet Nam different than a conventional wars of the past pivots around the role of the people. In World War II and in the Korea war, the indigenous populations were neither a military nor a political factor in the war. In the war in Vietnam, however, the people are of primary importance--the non-opposition, if not support, of the people allow the Communist guerrilla bands to without being detected, allow them to live off the land without a complicated logistical system, and on the political front, allow the Communists to form demonstrations, political crisis and economic hardship which has caused marked deterioration of the Vietnamese government strength.

Some American military commanders and advisors describe the difference between Vietnam and Korea in terms of guerrilla tactics, the lack of a solid frontline and the hit-and-hide techniques of the Viet Cong Communist fighters. But these tactics become applicable and effective only if the Communist fighters maintain the acquiescence of the people, primarily the rural peasants.

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In effect, the rural peasant becomes a shield for the tool for the Communist guerrilla fighters and political cadre. Officially, Washington announcements blame the sharp deterioration of the war on the increase of infiltration from North Viet Nam. There have been, according to reliable military sources, an increase of at least 10,000 North Vietnamese born soldiers from the People's Army of North Viet Nam. There battalion and regimental-sized attacks present a conventional, Korea-like to the war--but this is these attacks occur only occasionally, at the chosing of the Communists, and without a stationary, permanent frontline.

"Because the Americans have never understood the role of the people in the war here, they have never understood the ground war," one Western counterinsurgency expert explained.

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The failure of the French in their war here two decades ago was also the failure to understand the significant role of the people. The French maintained two pillars of support in Viet Nam--they controlled the cities and the armed forces. They attempted to control the countryside by building small turreted outposts or forts, in which the troops remained inside to defend roads and bridges, while the Vietnamese people remained outside to go about their farming. The Communist guerrillas--then called Viet Minh--simply overpowered on a one-by-one basis each of the individual forts.

With the beginning of the American military build-up in 1962, the Vietnamese government, with the aid and advise of American military and political advisors attempted to change this approach by initiating the strategic hamlet program. Under this program, the armed forces, mostly villagers, attempted to remain inside the village, rather than in an isolated outpost, to protect the people. At its peak, officially, 8,000 of the 12,000 villages in Viet Nam were somewhat under government control, protected by government troops.

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Following the fall of President Ngo Dinh Diem in November, 1963, the local Communist guerrillas, backed up by North Vietnamese Army units, shattered the strategic hamlet program. By the most optimistic estimates, only 2000 viable government strategic hamlets remain. The hamlet councils and chiefs either fled or were killed; the government local militia protecting the hamlets were either killed, overpowered or defected to the Viet Cong or more secure government centers. The Communists seized more and more control of the villages--and the peasants--placing the major cities in a virtual state of siege. The choice of the peasant was not to be pro-government or to be pro-Communist; the simple choice was to be a tool of the Communists, to be dead or to leave the area; the different villagers made different choices--some chose to be refugees, even though the government's and American aid program is so inadequate that some are virtually starving. Some were killed; but most chose to remain in their home villages and do as the Communists ordered.

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By the time the American Marines landed in February, 1965, the villages in the countryside--even within four miles of Danang city--were virtually lost. The people were indoctrinated or terrorized into helping the Communists. So that now, even the women and children are organized by the Communists to conduct war against the Marines. In Danang city, 10-year-old Vietnamese newsboys sell Time and Newsweek magazines on the street and are suspected by reliable sources of being a Viet Cong intelligence net. In one outlying outpost, young Vietnamese children sold Coca Cola to the Marines--and then secretly sketched the defense plan of the outpost. In one sweep operation south of Dangng, a young Vietnamese peasant boy handed a live grenade to an American Marine.

According to U.S. Marine sources, small Vietnamese boys are organized to tend water buffalo in the villages--and then to report to American troop movements. Young Vietnamese women are organized as fighters, as intelligence agents or as provocateurs.

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Since the villagers were lost to the Communists before the Marines arrived, the question remains whether the people of the countryside can be regained. So far, there has been some fragmentary improvements in the situation, but there is no overwhelming momentum towards victory. With the downfall of the strategic hamlet program, the Marines are still perilously close to the tactical concept of the French-fort with antennas of patrols radiating outwards. Politically, the Americans position does not have the disadvantage of being a colonial power--though this may be of marginal impact upon the Vietnamese villager who, since the day he was born, hated all foreigners. But, as a corollary of not being a colonial power, the American political position lacks any political control on the Vietnamese governmental administration, the Vietnamese army, the Vietnamese police and intelligence agencies--all of which were French-run under the French colonial rule.

According to highly reliable sources, the most basic difficulty in defeating the Communists politically and militarily lies in Washington itself.

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"The problem of Vietnam is not the problem of the state Department, or the Central Intelligence Agency, or the Agency for International Development or the Pentagon," the American official familiar with both Vietnam and Washington explained. "The problem of Vietnam fall beyond the jurisdiction of every agency. There is no American political agency or nerve center which has the power, responsibility or authority to meet the Communist exceptionally subtle Communist political strategy.

"The American Embassy in Saigon follows the classical diplomat function of reporting at the government-to-government level," one American official explained. "The Central Intelligence Agency reports intelligence information to Washington. The economic aid mission in Saigon is the same as in any other country in the world. The Pentagon and its military establishment are traditionally ordered to keep out of politics. All of these functions are necessary, of course, but there are great gaps between. There is no American political apparatus that welds a dynamic political program with the Vietnamese government to meet the Communist political threat.

"There's no use in looking for the solution to the Vietnam problem in Vietnam--the problem lies in Washington. We must change and adapt our whole government structure to meet this Communist problem on a world-wide basis." Until we do, we'll have defeat in Vietnam, in Santo Domingo, in the Cong and Congo and every other place the Communists chose.

(More tomorrow: The fire of the enemy)