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THE SUBTERRANEANS

DUONG SON I, (SUN HILL), SOUTH VIETNAM--The small Vietnamese boy in a floppy-doppy U.S. Marine Corps cap stood in the shade of the typical village shack and explained, "I'M not afraid of the American Marines.

"But they do steal our ducks. When they see the villagers watching them steal the ducks, they put them back in the rice paddy waters. But when we're not looking, they go ahead and steal them."

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A group of eight other Vietnamese villagers, both men and women, watched the youngster and then began reeling off their own grievances against the American Marines.

"We can't buy enough rice and shrimp paste in the district market," one of the women chewing blood-red betel nut explained. "If we buy too much, the police confiscate it and say we are supplying the Viet Cong." She used the word for Viet Cong--vac ong giai phong--which means literally, "Mr. Liberator."

"The Marines cut down our bamboo trees," one of the younger housewives explained. "In one case they cut down more than 30 bamboo trees--and I can sell each of those trees for 25 piastres in the local market."

An older man in tattered shirt and baggy-pajama-like pants continued the conversation with, "the Marines eat our bananas--they cut down one clump of bananas which would sell for 80 piastres (\$1) in the market."

Another chimed in, "Yes the Marines cut down our bananas, beat up the women, beat up the people and stop us from going to our rice paddies." He was asked whether he had seen this with his ~~own~~ own eyes.

"Yes, I've seen the Marines cut down the bananas," he explained nonchalantly.

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Continuously, the complained. "We have to work in the daytime; in the night-time we have to stay in the house or we will be shot. We even have to urinate inside our own house in the night-time; our house is our jail.

"We are so unhappy--we work all day for only enough to eat--just like the water-buffalo,"

The discussion in the village is the Communist political struggle, which is always of more importance, and in fact determined, the Viet Cong military tactics.

The villager's conversation reflected elements of the truth--with large doses of untruth added. The grievances are part of the Communist political struggle, which illustrate the totality of the war now engulfing and encircling the American Marines--and which they don't even see or comprehend.

Young Marine troopers sat in sandbagged foxholes to protect this former Viet Cong combat hamlet after the Viet Cong units had been driven out. Yet, nightly, the Marines received sniper fire from within the village; which is part of the small-scale military action, but simultaneously, the villagers themselves had unleashed a tornado of dangerous political agitation, which were much more dangerous than the bullets.

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The simple fact is that the most pro-Communist elements fled the village before the arrival of the American Marines to secure this village several weeks ago. This village, which once contained a population of 1,200, was reduced to a maximum of 500 before the arrival of the Marines. A few of the equivalents of a millionaires fled to the city; the youth, wives of Communists and able-bodied men fled with the Communists to the jungled mountains.

But, even those who had remained behind have both physically and politically gone underground. Through a labyrinth of tunnels, the armed military snipers can easily sneak under the American Marine foxholes and enter into the heart of the village to terrorize the population at night and to fire at the backs of the Marine troopers.

But, politically, their underground activities are much more dangerous, for some of the remaining villagers are considered--by the villagers themselves--to be secret Viet Cong agents. Other Viet Cong political agents have already surfaced in the village which the Marines protect--they are seen by the villagers, but not by the Marines or the Vietnamese village chief, who visits the village only with a heavily armed squad of troops.

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These villagers' indictments were designed to manufacture the most dangerous weapon of all-hate--to give to the villagers all the justifications to hate the Americans who, as one intellectual explained, "will always be a stranger in the villages, like the spirits or the devils. The villagers can't get used to the American's nose, their clothes, their looks. They will always be like phantoms or demons; but more than being a stranger, they will always be foreign."

It was the explosion of hate in the Indo-China War more than a decade ago that lead to the defeat of the French troops.

The Communist political struggle is divided into three inter-related aspects: the legal political struggle, the semi-legal and the illegal.

All three aspects can be clearly illustrated by such a simple item as Coca-Cola,--which is the symbol of American in Vietnam. Some of these incidents happen repeatedly in the Marine area.

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The legal, direct, face-to-face political struggle--to sell Coca Cola to the Marines, but to be sure the young Vietnamese vendor haggles about the price, thus creating friction between the Marines and the Vietnamese.

The semi-legal--to sell cokes to the Marines, but to accept payment in nickels and dimes, instead of piastres (which the Marines are not issued), which created such a violent insult to Vietnamese nationalism that Prime Minister Nguyen Cao Ky mentioned the phenomenon in a Saigon press conference. While technically it is illegal to accept foreign currency in Vietnam, the Vietnamese government, because of the immensity of the problem, which has yet to be solved--has in effect closed its eyes on the matter.

Another example of the semi-legal struggle is to sell cokes to the Marines, in an isolated outpost, to sit down and talk with them for sometime--and then the vendor--usually small boys--have a head-ful of intelligence information and can return to draw sketches of the Marine defenses. This happened in the Marine outposts only 5 miles from the center of Danang city.

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The illegal political struggle--to sell cokes to the Marines, but to have the cokes poisoned. The coke of a Seabee was filled with acid--his stomach was burned out. Another coke was filled with powdered glass; the buyer died. In another example, small boys selling cokes carried cokes in small baskets and followed a Marine patrol--the vendors dropped in the Marine footsteps Viet Cong leaflets reading "Hail to the Liberators of the Danang Airbase," referring to the mortar and suicide who sabotaged American aircraft.

Other examples of the Communist political struggle: the night before the Marines arrived in one small district town less than five miles from Danang, the Viet Cong political agents called a meeting of villagers, told them not to cooperate with the Marines--and raised the Viet Cong flag as the government district chief and his platoons slept only three blocks away. In another case, the Marines began to be accepted by one village by the use of their medical corpsmen; three Viet Cong appeared to be treated and told the villagers that anyone who accepted the Marines medical help would be killed. The number of sick in the village dropped drastically.

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One incident in this small village illustrates how military actions by the Viet Cong may be effected for political ends. Shortly after the Marines had secured this village, several aircraft were flying overhead to bomb a neighboring village totally controlled by the Viet Cong. Suddenly, a red ~~smoke~~ smoke grenade used to signal the target--puffed out of the heart of this Marine-controlled village; the plane swooped down and unleashed. 20mm. rocket fire. Fortunately, the flight was aborted before the 500-pound bombs were expended--nonetheless, three Vietnamese villagers were wounded.

"Imagine, we almost bombed our own village," the Marine regimental commander explained. "We still can't understand how it happened--no Marines had any red smoke grenades in the village; none of the government forces did either. There must be a Viet Cong in our village who monitored our radio."

Even as Marine troops sit in sandbagged positions around the village, the disgruntled citizens and Viet Cong propaganda agents are still in a state of total invisible war against them.

"The Communist political arguments are designed to arouse emotion--to control the heart, the heart is the subconscious and another kind of underground, which unfolds in dreams but not when you're awake, one Vietnamese explained here.

So far, neither the American Marines nor Vietnamese government have even become aware of this--and haven't begun to counter it.