

Error: Making Americans Maddered

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SAIGON.

The Viet Cong Communist attack on the United States B-57 jet-fighter bombers a week ago was a brilliant tactical victory but a major strategic miscalculation.

For the mortar bombardment of the Bien Hoa airfield, only 18 miles from Saigon, highlighted for officials in Washington the fact that with the current policy, the war is being lost.

Very forcefully, the Bien Hoa attack points to the need for a change in policy—and soon. Major post-election policy changes were to be anticipated anyway, but the Bien Hoa attack, according to observers, at the least “will shorten the time in which policy decisions can be postponed.”

In Washington yesterday it was made known that Ambassador Maxwell D. Taylor would return for talks in a week or so.

In Saigon yesterday, the sound of explosions rattled windows and shook up citizens.

The Vietnamese Air Force was carrying out massive air raids on Communist strongholds near the city.

NO MEDALS

Whether the noise that startled Saigoneses stemmed from these raids, or from army troops blowing up old ammunition, was not known.

What was known was that the Vietnamese Air Force in eight hours dropped 120 tons of bombs on a variety of Communist targets, some no further than 15 miles from the capital, in retaliation for the Bien Hoa attack.

Although that attack on Nov. 1 demolished or damaged 20 American jet-bombers, and inflicted the heaviest American casualties tolls in a single incident in the war—four killed and 72 wounded—observers here predict that the Communist planners will not receive any medals for the feat.

Observers believe the attack—a psychological shock to Americans and Vietnamese here—created the impression “The Communists can take over the country now—but why don't they?” The effect may well mean the Commu-

nists may lose some of their mass support by promising something that is still years away in reality.

Hence, the Bien Hoa attack is considered too early—it was a small-scale Dien Bien Phu without the immediate prospect of final military or political victory.

“Bien Hoa has made the Americans madder,” explained one reliable source. “The Americans have not yet decided to change their strategy but Bien Hoa attack makes that time come closer. This is the significance of the attack.”

The attack came only days before a new Saigon government had been announced—a government which American policy officially backs. “But the Americans are backing a weak and inept government,” according to one reliable source. “I'm not saying it's weak and inept as a criticism. It's a fact.”

The American policy is to think that the American concepts of prosecuting the political and economic war, of administering the American multimillion dollar aid pro-

gram, of implementing the American-backed pacification program—that all of this must be done through the machinery of the Vietnamese government. The choices facing the Americans are to continue working through this weak—and corrupt—government, to change that government or to work around it, principally by using the Vietnamese army and its leader, Maj. Gen. Nguyen Khanh, as a substitute for the government apparatus.

The weeks to come should reveal which choice Washington makes in reality, although American policymakers may in effect officially continue to support the newly-named government.

Officially, the American view is to work for an effective Vietnamese government—and build all policy on that. However, as long as the Communist-oriented Buddhist movement is capable of attacking any Saigon regime, there appears to be little chance that the country will ever have a strong government. Thus, there may well be in the offing a shift

in the American tolerant attitude toward the Buddhists, and the Vietnamese government might decide to crack down on known Communists within the movement.

The instability of the three-day-old civilian government of Premier Tran Van Huong was underlined yesterday when the High National Council refused to throw its prestige behind the cabinet, under fire from students and Buddhists for not reflecting their political power. The Council limited itself to stating support of the Premier “in order to solve this unrest with him.” It also confirmed the resignation of its acting chairman, Dr. Nguyen Xuan Chu, who feels the same way about the cabinet as the students and Buddhists.

Premier Huong, facing the gathering opposition, took care to note yesterday that his government would not tolerate any demonstrations. His regime received support from the man who counts, Gen. Khanh. In a statement, he said “only working in union can we defeat the danger of Communist dictatorship.”

In the most general terms, American policymakers are faced with two sets of choices: to contain the conflict within South Viet Nam

terinsurgency war but to attempt to save Viet Nam by making the conflict more of a conventional war.

This decision would have the effect of making Viet Nam a “little Korea,” with multi-national troops called in to support the anti-Communist government—a United Nations command without the United Nations.

Fragmentary evidence suggests that the conflict will be carried outside of South Viet Nam—and that the war will become more conventionalized. The arrival of a high-ranking Filipino foreign ministry official in Saigon last week has increased speculation that Asian combat troops—Filipino, Thai, Formosan and South Korean—might be the next step forward enlarging the war. This may or may not mean that American combat troops will be sent to Viet Nam, principally for garrison duty to secure provincial capitals and major military installations—thus releasing South Vietnamese troops for offensive operations.

Vietnamese observers also believe that American policy changes may well include massive aerial bombardment of Communist supply bases outside South Viet Nam. This would probably be centered in the southern-tongue of Laos, through which run the key infiltration and supply routes from North Viet Nam.

Observers in Viet Nam believe this scheme to block infiltration from southern Laos may well be connected with the current offensive of right-wing troops against Communist Patnet Lao forces on the Plain of Jars.