

Viet a Year Later

U. S. Tackling Past Mistakes In Weird War

A year ago next week Viet Nam witnessed the birth of a military revolutionary government and the death of the Ngo Dinh Diem regime. Tanks, paratroopers, Marines exploded on the streets of Saigon—a phenomenon that was to become increasingly familiar in succeeding months.

Viewed from a distance, the continuing conflict in Viet Nam sits the free world against the Communist camp. Closer, it is the American backed Saigon government against the Communist-led National Liberation Front. And in the war-weary delta it is an American G. I. and a Vietnawese trooper against Viet Cong guerrilla.

In this first of a seven-part series Beverly Deepe, the Herald Tribune's correspondent in Saigon, assesses the nature of the conflict in Viet Nam today and the stratagems, myths and miscalculations that shaped it.

By Beverly Deepe
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SAIGON.

The weakness of Ngo Dinh Diem was not that he failed in anything in particular but that he only half-succeeded in everything. Viet Nam's tragedy is that no government since Diem has even half-tried. Programs he implemented—poorly—have since been only half-implemented or forgotten. Diem's obsession was that his country would be divided by Communists in Northern provinces. Now that obsession is a semi-reality. His approach was to "beat the Communists by being better Communists tactically." He failed. But no government since has had a total policy of beating the Communists at all.

The first alternative to Diem was a committee government of a military junta. The expectation was that talented military officers would "win support of the people" while vigorously prosecuting the war. But Viet Cong incidents reached an all-time high. The important "strategic hamlet" program crashed bringing down with it the statistical illusion that the war was being won.

There were predictions that the first junta of Maj. Gen. Duong Van Minh would last 90 days. The junta lasted 89.

The second alternative to Diem was another strong-man. When General Nguyen Khanh became Premier on Jan. 30, Washington attempted to give him magical prestige. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara came one month; and Secretary of State Dean Rusk came the very next month. In mid-August Khanh legalized his strong-man position with an infamous constitution. He would have succeeded if students in Saigon—had been studying and Buddhist priests had been praying in their pagodas. But they were not. And somewhere "invisible hands—Communist subversives—appeared. After bloody demonstrations and religious rioting Khanh vowed to step down by next Tuesday. During the past two months Khanh's policy has been simply one of survival. U. S. policy is simply "backing every status quo in sight," according to one Western diplomat.

FULL CIRCLE

Thus, one year after Diem's death Viet Nam has traveled full circle. A newly announced provisional constitution provides for a single strong-man—like Khanh's and Diem's—but that strong-man can be neither Diem nor Khanh and probably no strong-man at all.

But if he will not be the strong man, informed opinion still has it that Gen. Khanh will be the strongest around. Yesterday at a brief garden reception he said his farewells as Premier to the government, diplomatic corps and foreign newsmen—without formally resigning yet. "I count on all of you to continue to carry out our mission to rid our beloved fatherland of Communists," he said.

It was being said yesterday that Nguyen Luu Vien, presently Interior Minister and Gen. Khanh's cousin would take over the Premiership. But evidence that Gen. Khanh will retain perhaps preponderant powers was the dismissal from the army of three generals and five colonels who only on Friday had treason charges stemming from a n attempted coup Sept. 13, against them, dismissed by a court. And the Defense Department announced the sentencing of these and four other officers to "fortress arrest" for 30 to 60 days by an Army discipline council.

Under Diem there were two political and military Viet Nams—his and the Communists'.

Since Diem there has been two military Viet Nams but three political Viet Nams—a state within a state within a state—a government within a government within a government. The third political government is the Buddhist movement that sparked the coup against Diem and the demi-coup against Khanh.

The Buddhist movement is now widely considered a political movement surviving only by being a movement of protest. Instead of declaring war on Communists, however, Buddhists have said their immediate enemies are Catholics, Americans and the Saigon government.

The Saigon government therefore has considered Buddhists as the "second enemy."

Meanwhile, a popular myth about the "first enemy"—about the war against the Viet Cong—appears to be exploding.

The giant myth was to think of Viet Nam as waging a counter-guerrilla war instead of a counter-revolutionary action. Until the last several months, American policy makers have not drawn the distinction between the military guerrilla and the political revolutionary.

The Communist objective is clear. A takeover. But their strategists have advocated an interim solution, an "independent and neutral Viet Nam." The prerequisite for this is withdrawal of American military advisers.

To attain the political objective, the Communists have consistently employed two means: Guerrilla warfare and political subversion.

DISSIDENT MOVEMENTS

Long-time observers believe political subversion has consistently been predominant, although not obvious. The change in the last three months is that subversion has shifted from the provincial rural areas to Saigon and the cities in Central Viet Nam, making it more evident.

The administrative apparatus of the Communist party is given over primarily to military affairs. But there are nine other areas of activity, such as action among enemy troops (infiltration of the government armed forces) and action among the civilian population.

For the last three years, American military advisers and Vietnamese field commanders have been bewildered by the fundamental military problem—how to tell the difference between a Communist guerrilla and a rice-paddy farmer. Now this problem has become accentuated, as it moves into the political sphere. Vietnamese government officials are openly worried about who in the Vietnamese administration, army, student bodies, labor unions and religious groups may be Communist cadre, or influenced by Communist agents.

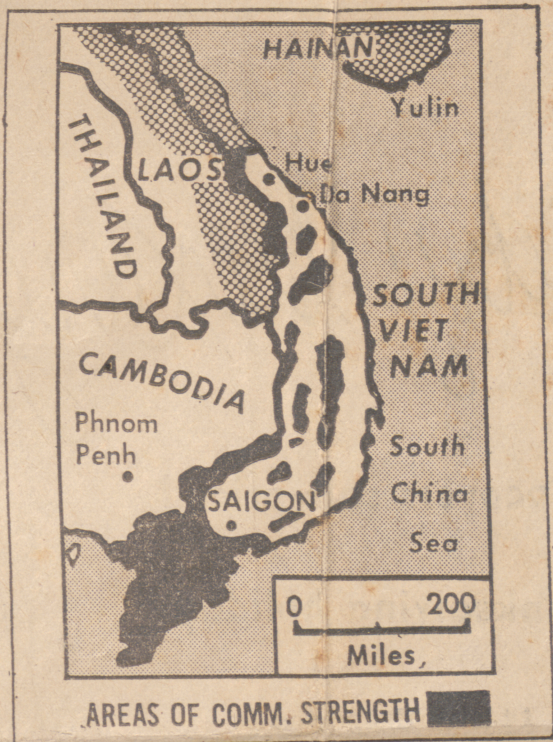
To counter the military threat, American military advisers, special forces, support units (helicopters, aircraft) flowed into Viet Nam, until the figure reached 18,000, with an additional 2,000 expected by the end of 1964.

(Yesterday, the American combat casualties, already over 200, were feared to have increased by five, when a C-123 transport, dropping ammunition and other supplies to an outpost, was hit by Communist groundfire, crashed and exploded. There were no signs that the Americans and the two Vietnamese aboard had survived.)

But only during the last three months have the staffs

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In Idaho-sized South Viet Nam the government holds complete control of relatively little of the nation. The Communist Viet Cong is dominant in the back area.



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of American civilian agencies been expanded. In July, the United States Information Agency doubled its strength to reach about 50; the Agency for International Development (AID) doubled, to almost 400. The American Embassy staff rose to 125.

In simplest terms, a microphone used to arouse the people in demonstrations has become more dangerous than machine-guns mowing down government troops.

The story of the Communist political subversive warfare in South Viet Nam began in 1954. After the French defeat in Indochina the Geneva agreements of 1954 imposed a cease-fire and separated Viet Nam at the 17th parallel. Communist North Viet Nam was headed by President Ho Chi Minh. The Republic of (South) Viet Nam shortly afterward was headed by President Ngo Dinh Diem.

The Geneva agreements also provided that Communist troops should be withdrawn to the North and the anti-Communist Northerners could move to the South.

Likewise, the Geneva accords provided that in July, 1955, a referendum would be held in both sections on re-unifying the country. President Diem refused to agree. From 1954 to mid-'65, the open policy of the Communists was to abide by the Geneva agreements in an attempt to take over the South through peaceful reunification.

When the elections fell through, the Communists continued their political struggle, but shifted to subversive tactics. They infiltrated the national army, not to convert it openly, but to secure intelligence data. The Communist cells in the villages—many Reds did not go North—became secret societies; the party apparatus went underground.

In 1957, the Communists countered Diem's massive arrests of Communists by systematically killing government village officials. These assassinations were part of their illegal political struggle, not the beginning of armed military activity.

Second, a Southern-born Communist named Le Duan wrote a long study about the situation in the South. He concluded that the Communists could not reverse the anti-Communist trend by political struggle alone, and advocated military struggle.

PRO-PEKING WING

It took two more years for the Communist party to gain its momentum. The party in North Viet Nam, and became a leader of the pro-Peking wing of the party.

In 1958, the North Vietnamese sent an underground mission to the South to study the situation. A year later, Ho Chi Minh and the party decided to launch the armed struggle.

In early 1960, Ho Chi Minh made a trip to Peking and Moscow and presumably asked approval by the other two major parties. After his return, the General Assembly of the party legalized the previous resolution to support the guerrillas in the South. This meant that Ho Chi Minh had received the green light from Peking and/or Moscow.

Simultaneously, President Diem was running into trouble. In early 1960, Communist troops routed a government battalion, giving the government its first defeat. In November an abortive paratrooper coup attempted to pressure Mr. Diem into making social, economic, political reforms. He had previously formed a system of co-ordinating various ministries; built up his own party, the National Revolutionary Movement, to counter the Communist organization; developed his counter-Communist ideology called Personalism, which neither peasants nor intellectuals understood. Reform was minimal; he ignored his promises to the coup-makers; corruption remained unchecked.

But the abortive coup attempt undoubtedly acted as a catalyst for the birth of the National Liberation Front for South Viet Nam (the front for the Communist party). Forty days after the coup, the Front delegates met in the swampy Plain of Jones southwest of Saigon and established a provisional central committee. Thirteen months later, the People's Revolutionary party was organized as the Communist party of South Viet Nam, ostensibly separating from the party in North Viet Nam.

Throughout 1961, more than 5,000 Communist cadres infiltrated from North Viet Nam.

As the situation worsened for Mr. Diem, the American government acted. In May, 1961, Vice-President Johnson visited Viet Nam, promising increased American aid for rural development. He also promised military aid to Vietnamese forces who would assist provincial police to contain Communist advances.

But this military assistance came five years after initial pleas by the Diem government for systematic military assistance. Observers here believe this initial aid rejection in 1956-'57 was the most critical mistake of the American policy makers.

GROUND WORK FOR AID

Several months later, in October, 1961, chairman of the American Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Maxwell Taylor (now Ambassador) visited Viet Nam and laid the groundwork for massive American military aid. By Christmas, the first American helicopters had arrived.

In February, 1962, the Americans formalized their military operation into the Military Assistance Command, Viet Nam, under the command of Gen. Paul D. Harkins. Only days later, two Vietnamese fighter aircraft bombed the Presidential palace, but President Diem and his family escaped injury.

During 1962, both the Vietnamese government forces, heavily supported by American advisers, and the Communist guerrillas mushroomed in strength. The American strategists and the South Vietnamese government initiated the Strategic Hamlet program. Economic aid, guns, locally trained militia and schools blossomed—but neither the economic or military plans touched the Communist cells in hamlets. Subversion remained unchecked, as more than 4,000 additional Communist cadres infiltrated into the country throughout the year.

A slow deterioration began in 1963. It started Jan. 2 with the battle of Ap Bac, when Viet Cong Communist guerrillas routed government troops and shot down a handful of American helicopters only 40 miles from Saigon.

The political explosion against President Diem came in mid-year. On May 8, a Buddhist incident in old imperial capital of Hue led to the toppling of the Diem regime in November.

Circumstantial evidence indicates political developments leading to anti-Diem coup may have been influenced by the Communists, but no one here knows to what extent.

Last Jan. 30, Gen. Nguyen Khanh "reshuffled" the military junta which had toppled Diem. He is now facing almost seven years of unchecked political subversion by the Communists, plus increasing military strength. The question is how extensive the subversion has become through the years—and what action to take to squelch it.

The next article will appear tomorrow.