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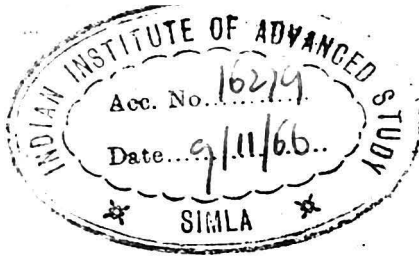
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REPORT FROM SOUTH VIETNAM

By DENNIS DUNCANSON

(Address given to the Royal Central Asian Society on September 10, 1963.)

FIRST, I would like to thank the Society for its invitation to come and talk to you once more and report on the things I have been doing since I was last here. Talks on subjects of this kind usually begin with a disclaimer by the speaker of his official standing; but perhaps in the present case that goes almost without saying, because my position in the East is one of an adviser, not of a representative of H.M.G., and of course national policy is not involved in the giving of advice. Advice is always a very personal matter, and therefore the observations I have made in Vietnam during these last two years are, if I may put it so, very much my own work.

Everything in Vietnam today really goes back to the famous battle of Dien Bien Phu, which finally rocked the French administration of the country; and when President Ngo Dinh Diem came to preside over the destinies of his country on its first attaining independence he did so indirectly as a result of that battle. Because it was a battle, and its outcome was determined by the fortunes of war, the settlement which followed it at Geneva was a diplomatic bargain; it was not planned and it was not foreseen, and the new Government took over a country from which the previous Government had simply been removed. It was, of course, a phased removal, but the phases were very quick, and the new Government had to cope with a state of near chaos.

First of all, the Communists who withdrew to the north of the 17th Parallel had been in occupation of quite large areas of the South which fell to the new Government, and some had been administered by them for a long time. The country had been fighting, in effect, since 1945; it was war-weary, and much was destroyed: railways did not run, the roads had been blown up, essential services did not function any more. In addition, there were a million refugees who, in response to an article of the Geneva agreements, chose to leave the North for the South. On the other hand, large numbers of people who lived in the South were taken away to the North by the Communists with their retreating armies in a state of more or less captivity with a view to being sent back later as agents, to subvert the new Government. The auspices, then, for that Government were not very good. And I remember well that at that time our own Government came under considerable unofficial criticism in the United States for having been co-chairman with Russia at the negotiations. The agreement was not signed by the United States nor by the new Government of South Vietnam, neither of which has since felt itself to be bound, strictly speaking, by its

terms. And the view, certainly in the United States at the time—and I think generally in the world—was that this new country had no hope of viability. The Communists were bound to take it over—it was just a matter of time. The “falling dominoes” principle was going to operate; the Communists in the North would walk in on one pretext or other, take over the South, and then gradually swallow up the whole of Indo-China, and after Indo-China, Thailand and Malaya and so on.

Well, this of course has never happened, and if the Communists themselves ever seriously thought that South Vietnam was going just to drop into their lap they must have been disappointed. The new Government presided over by Ngo Dinh Diem set itself a number of tasks. First of all it had to make itself politically stable. In addition to the chaos of the Communist war, the country had been riven for years by fighting religious sects which organized their followers into private armies, in a manner, one might say, analogous to the way Communist guerrillas are organized. The power of these sects had to be broken. The secret societies which had run the gambling dens of Cholon under French licence were liquidated, largely as a result of the efforts of the President's younger brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, who has been much in the news lately. The Cao Dai and the Hoa Hao sects were incorporated in the new army and given an opportunity of rehabilitating themselves as loyal citizens of the new Government.

The President has also had to provide for the rehabilitation of the million refugees, a measure involving an extensive land-settlement programme. He had to provide the rudiments of a government administration, particularly in the countryside. From the French he had inherited a civil service which was patchy. Many offices had been filled by Frenchmen who had withdrawn, fewer by Vietnamese. When the French withdrew the Vietnamese officers were left high and dry, and making good the cadre of the administration presented forbidding problems. The country lacked an efficient police force. There was no police force at all in the countryside, and all that remained in the towns was the shadow of the French Sûreté and a few uniformed policemen who had been in the ranks under the French, but fell far short of a working structure for an effective force. All those deficiencies had to be made good, and above all, of course, the country had to look to its defence.

The big threat seemed at the time to be an invasion from the North. The Communist armies had withdrawn, but they were still strong, and they were still organized in their companies, their battalions and their divisions; if the South was going to be able to stand on its own feet it must be able to defend itself against them.

Now, the Americans had been in the country for two or three years during the later stages of the French occupation, and they already had there a Military Aid and Advisory Group and a United States Operations Mission. (These are the customary military and civil organs of American aid.) They gave their first attention to the training of an army. They did this with notable success, training and equipping units of all representative arms that, in four or five years, were well able to take on an invading force from the North. But, of course, during the time the President was bringing in a Constitution, crushing the sects, settling people on the land

and launching a land reform movement of his own in competition with Communist promises, the Communists themselves remained active. And their first hope, I think, lay in that part of the Geneva accords which said that the whole country, North and South, should, when stable conditions returned, be enabled to elect a Government which would re-unify it. (This, I am sure, remains the political dream of Vietnamese all over and on both sides of the 17th Parallel—that eventually Vietnam should be reunited again.) But there was no likelihood of free elections in the North, and the President thwarted the Communist hope simply by refusing to hold elections. This has certainly proved wise, because it nullified the first Communist threat, namely that of open subversion.

However, with their usual patience, they set to to prepare bases; they developed old bases that they had laid down under the French, and they prepared new ones with a view to starting a guerilla war as early as possible. Their methods of subversion are of course well known: they use combinations of blackmail and terror to persuade people, for reasons not directly connected with Communism, to support them in one way or another. Once a man performs a service for them he cannot then turn back, for fear he may be given away to the authorities. All he can do is to carry on, and get more and more deeply involved. The key is to *subvert* first and to *convert* only when the recruit is truly in their power.

In the areas that had been under Communist government, the Vietcong had been careful to leave behind women who had been married to their soldiers before these were marched off to the North. These women then had children, and the children were of course the families of Communist soldiers in the North—a further bond, which they intended to exploit again when the fighting began. Terror was operated, to manipulate public opinion in the countryside, as it has been in China and other places: they switch it on and off. When they switch it on, they get everybody fearing and hating them. When they turn it off, the peasants' unexpected relief from the terror evaporates the hate while leaving the fear, because they are no longer being bullied, as it is in the Communists' power to do.

By such policies as these, the Communists expanded their bases all over the countryside, in accordance with the well-known strategy of Mao Tse-tung, which had previously been applied to Indo-China generally and had culminated in the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu. The strategy is gradually to increase the number of subverted elements in the countryside, to start training them in sabotage and then from sabotage to work up to small military attacks, and from small military attacks to bigger ones until gradually the "oil stain", as the French called it, spreads throughout the countryside. A process of encirclement with well-placed agents, who are part-time fighters, part-time food growers, part-time informers, is extended systematically until it has surrounded all the Government bases it is intended to undermine, and all its towns, and they can begin to be picked off.

This was the policy that the Vietcong began to pursue for the second time, and gradually, early in 1959, they began to heat up the shooting. They took on bigger and bigger targets and began to demoralize the peasantry, who of course had no immediate protection—only the scattered garrisons of the armed forces. Now the armed forces consisted principally

of the army, and the army with its big battalions and its big weapons—finely-trained of course to cope with an enemy organized like itself—straightaway found itself running after guerrillas, who, as soon as it arrived, disappeared. And the experience we had had in Malaya, the experience the French had had in Vietnam, now began to be repeated in the case of the independent Vietnamese army. It was at this stage that the President realized that the key to defence lay in the villages themselves, and he began to organize village defence, but without much American support; and in fact until 1961 the fighting against the guerrillas still had to be done, in the main, by the big guns of a rather sledge-hammer army.

During the course of 1960 and 1961 the boldness of the Communists worked up to the stage where they were able at last, in the summer of 1961, to venture battalion-strength attacks and to overrun a Government-held town. It was while the Mission of which I am a member was actually being assembled—whilst we were flying from different directions to Saigon, to begin our work—that the first province-capital in Vietnam was overrun by the Communists. A place called Phuoc Vinh, only about sixty miles from Saigon, was taken by assault. The Province Chief and the members of his staff were strung up, disembowelled, burnt at the stake; all the brutal atrocities customary in such attacks were committed. The effect of this news on the country was naturally profound, and it was hardly surprising that by this single attack the Communists were able to pull off a very successful propaganda blow. It was a moment like the assassination of Sir Henry Gurney in Malaya.

At this time—September 1961, just two years ago—it looked indeed as if there was very little hope of saving the situation. The Communists were now able to overrun a small town: it would not be long before they would be able to overrun a big one. The army was getting more and more spread out in little garrisons, as it had been under the French—a sitting target for the Vietcong. The more the Communists feinted in this direction or that, the more the army got extended. The more it became pinned down in its garrisons, the more immobile it was, and there seemed to be no hope of retaining popular support because the peasants in their little hamlets were of course still without immediate protection. In many villages it was only necessary for a Communist to raise his finger and the people, out of sheer fright, would do anything that was asked of them. The Government was defending its own installations but not the people.

Now, the really important thing about South Vietnam today is that those fears and anxieties, the near-certainty that at last the Communists were going to succeed—that phase III had been reached and there was going to be another Dien Bien Phu—well, those fears have not materialized. However else one may judge the Vietnamese situation, that is really the decisive and indisputable fact.

They have not materialized for two basic reasons. The first is that, after General Maxwell Taylor's visit to Saigon in October 1961, a decision was taken to pump into Vietnam every kind of aid and every kind of advice and help the U.S. Government could command to make sure that President Diem lacked for absolutely nothing to win this war. The second important factor came, not from outside but from inside the Vietnamese

Government; this was the acceptance of the fact that now the nettle must really be grasped—the Government must cut the Communists off from their supplies at the source, in the villages themselves. It was no good continuing to chase Communists out in the open, even if they were reported as being concentrated in attractive targets; one could never get there quickly enough to catch them. They must therefore be waited for at the point of contact with the people.

This was an application of the principle, at least, on which the war against the Communist terrorists had been won in Malaya. There too the Communists had been pursued for the first two, or two and a half, years of the Emergency. They had been chased through the jungle, up hill and down dale, and rarely caught up with. Success in Malaya only came when the Government eventually reconciled itself to all the expense, organization and temporary unpopularity that was entailed in severing the links on the edge of the village. This, then, was the policy that was launched at the beginning of 1962, and the Vietnamese Government gave it the name of “the strategic hamlet policy”.

The concept of the “strategic hamlet”, in the first place, was that you took your hamlet as it existed, and then instituted a truly astonishing campaign for digging moats and putting fences all round it in such a way that entry and exit was only possible thereafter through the gate. And in the space of about six months during the dry season between the harvest of 1961 and the spring-sowing of 1962, something like a third of the people in the country were organized into teams for the purpose of fencing off their villages in this manner. The immediate consequence of all this was that, first of all, the villagers were involved personally in activity on the side of the Government. Secondly, a brake was put on Communist infiltration. A Communist agent could no longer come into a house in the middle of the night and tap a sleeping villager on the shoulder and say, “Look here—a sack of rice under tree number 63 the day after tomorrow at midnight . . . or else!” This sort of thing was made infinitely more difficult, and made so in the first place as a result of organization rather than of any particular physical aid. The campaign is still going on, and the American Government has now supplied an enormous amount of material aid to reinforce what the villagers have done for themselves—but the first steps were taken by the villagers, under Government organization.

So it happened that for a change the territorial administration, the poor province chiefs who had no programme but to sit passively and wonder where the Communists were going to hit them next, had suddenly become active. For the first time, they had a purpose—had in fact been given a lead that meant the beginning of administration of the peasantry. The initiative had shifted from the enemy’s side to their own, and they realized that the more effectively they did their job the more gratifying would be the results accruing to themselves. From the villagers’ point of view it might be possible to look at the fence and say, “Set a match to that, or a determined push, and it will collapse”, but at least the first fences that went up were tokens of security. This was only a beginning, everybody could understand this—but the transition to the next thought was an easy one: “It will be improved as time goes on; this is the principle of security

—it is going to get safe now for us to co-operate with the Government; we are no longer going to be exposed to victimization—to being murdered, kidnapped, or brutalized in any other fashion.”

This is the campaign that has revolutionized the countryside in Vietnam, as it did in Malaya. As it has progressed, the United States has increased aid in the form of materials for reinforcing the villages; it has undertaken to arm and, indirectly, to train village militias, and within a few months of some of these villages being so organized, from having previously been heavily infiltrated by the Communists, there have been a number of notable battles in which they have courageously held off quite large formations until they could be rescued. Parallel with that, the Americans have put into the country the means of rallying much more quickly to the defence of an attacked village. They have set up numerous helicopter bases, supplied river patrol-boats and all sorts of other means of communication, with the result that as soon as a signal goes up, or a wireless message is received, reinforcements can be rushed to the village in a matter of an hour or less, instead of the facts not being known until perhaps twelve hours later. Similarly, of course, the wounded can be evacuated, and it is no longer quite so dangerous to get hurt, because you stand a good chance of being pulled out and taken to hospital and looked after properly.

The effect of all this on the countryside is plain on all sides, and it is now possible to go round villages in which the people have been re-grouped—places where the Government has said, “We are going to build a stockade and a moat here. There are only a few houses, and the rest of you live scattered on your own holdings, but if you come and live inside the fence we can give you security from the bullyings of the Vietcong”—and to see the ready response of returning confidence in the bustling atmosphere of the village. I have witnessed one or two removals, as an uninvited guest, and, although there must be many individuals who feel personally inconvenienced, the energy with which people generally put up their new homes is quite remarkable.

The Americans, of course, have also built up their aid in every other direction during this time, parallel with the strategic-hamlet movement. They have greatly increased the facilities for training, not only in the military direction but in the all-important administrative directions, to help the Government at last to fill the vacuum in the administration that was left by the retiring French and has provided the Vietcong with exploitable opportunities. For this is still, of course, the great lack in the country. The Vietnamese are not experienced administrators. Mostly, district administration has been put in the hands of army officers, who have in a great many cases turned out to be first-rate administrators, but they have been put there primarily to fight rather than to administer, and one can only hope the realization will grow amongst the country's leaders that defeat of Communism, however militant, depends even more on the latter function than on the former.

As a tangible manifestation of rural administration, the Americans have also provided the Government with the means to improve—or in many cases to start, since none existed before—rudimentary public services

in the strategic hamlets, much as we ourselves did in the new villages of Malaya. They provide the wherewithal to set up dispensaries, for schools to be built, and to make the roads safer and the bridges stronger. Interrupted bus services are being resumed and communications generally improved, and amenities like mobile cinemas can visit strategic hamlets.

The moral support that the Government is getting as a result of this is undoubtedly very significant—but for the future it is going to be necessary to carry all these measures a lot further. I do not mean to build more fences, but to improve the administration of the countryside. The territorial administration of the country has at last found its feet, and is doing so, I think, in a manner which is traditional to the countryside. Vietnam belongs, from the point of view of its traditions of Government, to the world of China, and it is accustomed to having its village affairs conducted by its own notables, chosen by ballot or by influence or by any other way—it does not much matter which, as long as they are good men and have the interests of the villagers at heart. They are accustomed by their traditions to wider authority being exercised by territorial administration, by a provincial governor or Mandarin, and authority in these traditional forms would seem to serve very well the modern situation. But it is going to be necessary, in the future, to identify the people much more with this emerging Government structure—to give the peasant a stake in the Government, as it were—and this can come about only if security is seen by the people to be really effective. This in turn will necessitate better planning, and better strategy on the part of the fighting forces, which, happily, are giving up their former defensive procedures of static posts out in the countryside in isolated positions which they inherited from the French (the little “Beau Geste” forts). In many places the Communists are feeling the pinch over food supplies, there have been a number of incidents lately when they have had to fight for their supplies. And, of course, an attack on the garrison of a strategic hamlet has become an attack on the people, with whom it is their propaganda aim to be identified.

But, in the main, defence of the village still rests, in the first instance, on their own militia, and schemes are now being started for giving leadership training to these paramilitary bodies as well as weapon drill. The army, though it is still making use whenever it can of its heavy guns to attack big formations when these can be pinned down, is switching over much more to mobile tactics—patrolling, deeper penetration of the jungles, and ambushing the Communists rather than waiting to be ambushed. This tells, of course, on the villagers, but at the same time they must be given, together with security, a reasonable prospect that their new way of life is going to last and is leading to a return to peace, confidence that the Government itself is going to last and that when the Province Chief or the army visits the hamlet they are not going to be there just for a few days to round up a few suspected terrorists and then move on again, leaving the villagers exposed as before to the unidentified terrorists in the background, who emerge and say, “Well, you see there is no real change. It is all as it was before. You too had better keep it up as before—your supplies, your information and your recruits.”

This brings us to another special administrative task for the Vietnamese

to tackle: the proper organization at last of their police force. In the main they have been content with trying to deal with Communist agents merely by having numerous counter-agents of their own, who went out and tried to observe the Communists in their bases, though with little hope of finding out what they were really up to. There has been very little co-ordinated activity where the police were concerned. The Communists have always operated in the villages very much more like criminals than like soldiers, and although the methods of gathering intelligence that have been developed by armies are excellent when one is actually dealing with a moving armed force, when on the contrary one's enemy is hidden among the ordinary citizenry it becomes a question of sorting out the sheep from the goats, of finding out who are the weaker brethren and who are the stronger—or the merely uncommitted ones, as it usually is, I am afraid. This can only be done by the patient methods of criminal investigation, and the Government is now, I think, giving itself earnestly to the organization of this kind of activity.

There are dangers in this situation and the Government of President Diem could yet not pull it off. The psychological revolution in the countryside of the last year or so has been so great that at times one feels one can breathe again and be confident that victory is not so very far away. But there are dangers. One of them is that in planning the strategic hamlets the Government has rushed ahead and said that everybody must work feverishly now and build a fence round his village wherever he is, even in areas that have been under Communist control for years and years. In getting everybody to do everything at once one runs a risk that the momentum will be lost when the work is done, and this I think is the biggest danger in Vietnam today—that momentum may be lost, in particular by the small men on whom the administration of the countryside rests in the last resort. For it does not repose all the time on the Government in Saigon: it is the little man who stands for the Government in the village, the district, the province, who determines the outcome of the conflict. The danger is that this little man will find he no longer has anything to do, and will become slack.

Another danger is "cutting corners". A lot of young people think that they can cut corners by acting on the principle which, I am afraid, they often hear foreigners urge on them, namely, "We shall never beat the Communists until we start adopting Communist methods". This, of course, would be fatal. The Government has to appear in the countryside, to the villagers, as being as different as possible from the Communists. And if it were to fall into that trap, if a district officer or a province officer were to start adopting Communist methods, he would find himself in trouble. It is not a moral question but a practical one. In particular, one finds that younger officers in the Government often expect far too much of propaganda. Some of them believe that it does not matter what they do so long as the Government propaganda agency is at hand to say they have done something else. This almost pathetic faith in propaganda, the failure to understand it, has undoubtedly been a disservice in many places. But if they can grasp the elements of provincial administration and avoid the pitfalls of what one might call "un-Communism"—trying to be *like*

the Communists although *against* the Communists—then they stand every chance.

What, one may ask, really are the prospects that these dangers will be averted? The answer, I think, is that they are extremely good, because the country has so many assets. It is a food-growing country: nobody ever starves in it. It has exports—not very much, but it has plantation exports if it does not have raw materials, and these are good for foreign exchange. It has boundless talent: many of the Vietnamese are highly educated, and whatever they may feel about their French background, I think it can be said that the French never denied them education. There are some extremely capable men available in the country, who of course can count on the experience of their village population to make the Vietcong seem a most disagreeable alternative. These areas that I mentioned before, which have been under long standing Communist occupation, know only too well what Communism means, and throughout the country one can find quite poor people who have no doubt at all in their minds that they do not want to live under a Communist régime. All this together adds up, I think, to a very firm basis for optimism, in spite of everything we have been reading in the newspapers lately. I think, in fact, it is a matter not so much of a pious hope that righteousness will be rewarded with success, as of certainty that the application of common sense *will* be; and the steps that have been taken in the Vietnamese countryside in the last eighteen months are a very good earnest that common sense is being applied at last.

(The above is the record of an address given in early September which itself was based on Mr. Duncanson's personal experience in South Vietnam up to several weeks before that date, when he went on leave. The address therefore antedates not only the coup d'état, but also the Buddhist troubles which preceded it. Mr. Duncanson, who has returned to Saigon, now sends us the following postscript.—ED.)

POSTSCRIPT FROM SAIGON, NOVEMBER, 1963

How has all this been affected by the passing of President Ngo-dinh-Diem? Accused of incompetence and tyranny, he was overthrown by his generals on November 1 and, having declined their invitation to abdicate formally in a farewell address to his people and then to fly away into exile, he met his death next morning, obscurely and meanly, outside a church in Cholon. One day historians may judge him more kindly, but, on the spot, his end seemed the consummation of a rule marked by consistent obstinacy and missed opportunities for leadership; it was in character. What then has the successor government inherited from him?

Diem, it is true, could not be blamed for the chaos it is said above he inherited in 1954; yet, with his brother Nhu, who was the individual most responsible for the Marxian veneer of the government, he ran the country through cliques, secret agencies and *ad hoc* organizations, and deliberately undermined the civil service—the country's, and his own, best hope for stability in the face of Communist wrecking—because he saw in it no loftier potential than as another faction and a rival for power. Working

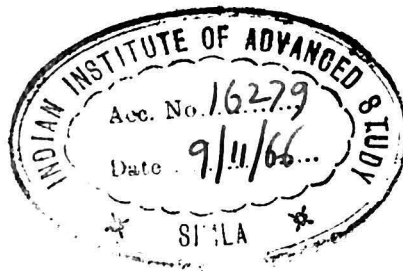
conditions in most of the ministries in Saigon were chaotic and, latterly, paralysed by fear.

Thus far the picture is familiar from other under-developed—or rather, in the case of Vietnam, immature—countries. But hope for the future comes from the new structure of administration in the countryside that has been developing, paradoxically, during the terminal phase of the old régime's decline. As the Communists well know, it is in the countryside that the struggle against terrorism will be won or lost; it is likewise there that public administration too must find its feet or fail altogether.

The biggest perils facing the provisional government at its inception are twofold. The first is that they could unwittingly re-enact the errors of their predecessors by throwing out too much of the old structure while retaining too many of the old policies. The second is that they could be jockeyed by immature and urban-based political parties into premature elections which would result, not in the fair, progressive and competent administration the peasant needs and consciously desires, but in the factional and sectarian bickering Vietnam is traditionally prone to. In any country the machinery of government needs to be strongly built before arrangements are introduced for periodical changes of its political direction: justice needs to come somewhat ahead of democracy. All the more so in a country torn by Communist civil war.

But the signs are that the provisional government will adopt the inherited foundation and build on to it, using the generous funds of foreign aid for the purpose for which they are offered—namely to make Vietnam strong, prosperous and truly independent. The survival of Vietnam will depend as certainly on the common sense of the new leaders as its decline until a few weeks ago looked like following certainly from the obscurantism of the old.

D. D.



~~21 JUN 2014~~