

# 'Selective Statistics'

## Shape Policy

### on Vietnam

The President is perched on the brink of a decision that could commit this country to a land war in Asia, a war that could escalate to a point beyond human comprehension. And this decision will be made with the help of inhuman statistics developed from always doubtful information.

For an assessment of the kind of information used and its weaknesses—in short, the possibility of horrible error—Opinion called on two men as close as newsmen can get to the rapidly developing events in Washington and Saigon: Jack Foisie, Times bureau chief in Vietnam, back there now after visiting Washington and Paris, and Robert Donovan, Times bureau chief in Washington.

#### Planners Grasp at Plus Signs

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JACK FOISIE

SAIGON

Wherever you went for discussion on the "Vietnamese problem" in Washington—in the anterooms of Congress, or the offices in the Pentagon or State Department, there was use of selected figures to prove a point.

This also was true in Paris, when lunching with officials of the French foreign ministry.

Policy on Vietnam seems to be too much influenced by belief in selective statistics. On the other hand, sta-

tistics which do not support the prevailing policy are downgraded, regarded with suspicion or ignored.

For an example of where officialdom seems to have embraced a statistic because it bulwarks their thinking, take the report of 82 Viet Cong who came over to the government side en masse about six weeks ago in one of Vietnam's central provinces. I heard that figure cited twice in Washington, once by a rather high official in the State Department, once by hardly a lesser official in the Pentagon.

#### Partly Phony

They were men who formulate policy. I was surprised they had even heard of the incident, much less grasped it as an indicator of progress in the war in Vietnam.

For in fact, it was partly phony as reported and a trifle happening at best. An indicator of nothing significant, my own and the investigation of other reporters had shown after it was first announced in Saigon.

The desertions were not "hard core" Viet Cong as indicated in the original report. They proved to be but farm boy recruits impressed into the Viet Cong but a few weeks before.

The American command had hailed the mass desertions as significant indication of declining Viet Cong morale. But when correspondents sought to interview the young turncoats the Vietnamese government suddenly found it inconvenient to allow the

press into the interrogation camp.

And yet, two high policy-makers in Washington were citing this accident of war as something very meaningful, a weakening of Viet Cong willingness to fight.

#### Disillusioning Week

It would have been just as ridiculous for Chinese Communists to hail the refusal of an American officer on Okinawa to join his special forces unit in Vietnam as indicating that American military were fed up with the United States involvement in Southeast Asia.

It was a disillusioning week in Washington. One comes away from the confusion of Saigon hoping to find clarity among the planners in the nation's capital. Perhaps that was too much to expect. To substantiate opinion I heard only the well-worn, highly polished figures that had been refined in Saigon and made even more palatable in the chambers of Washington before presentation to the men in high position.

#### Negative Ignored

However realistic in generalities Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara may speak, based on his latest visit to Saigon, the figures that seem to be in general circulation accentuate the positive. I never heard the negative — how many miles of roads and railroad we have lost in the last six months, for example.

Although the decision to commit large-scale American combat units in Vietnam is apparent, and is obvious to the enemy through the buildup of logistical ba-

s on the central coast, authorities in Washington try to pretend that we really are not committed to land warfare in Asia, to casualties as large or larger than suffered during the Korean war.

In Paris the prevailing opinion is that American forces have no chance of winning over the Viet Cong. The argument boils down to the belief that Americans cannot win in Vietnam because the French did not win there.

#### Human Argument

It is a human argument, a mixture of pride and patriotism and a larding of parallels now existing in Vietnam to the military situation of the French just months prior to their surrender.

While American officials in Washington grasp at plus factors, the negative figures are cited by French officials including those just booted out of Saigon through Prime Minister Nguyen Cao Ky's flamboyant and rather meaningless cutting of diplomatic relations already severed at higher levels.

The fact remains that the most interesting point about the French position is not their pessimism but their seeming decision to withdraw totally from Asian affairs, regardless of the outcome in Vietnam.