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Summing Up

HONG KONG.

The temptation is to sum up a short visit to Vietnam by giving figures which suggest how the situation there is tilted at this moment. To that temptation I partly succumb.

Here, first, is some bad news. We have not succeeded in devising the means of persuading North Vietnamese soldiers to defect. This is not a tribute to their ideological constancy, so much as testimony to their home-mindedness. Defection means for them a permanent separation from their families and, not inconceivably, retaliation against their families. There is abundant evidence that the North Vietnamese tire not only of the rigors of the war but of the manifest futility of it.

Still, the tendency is to do what one is told, and to dream of repatriation. Defection is for the few, the very few who will live apart from their families. Fewer than one thousand North Vietnamese have defected. By contrast, 120,000 Viet Cong have defected.

An enormously important datum, inasmuch as the conduct of the war has passed dramatically in the past year or so from the hands of the Viet Cong on over to the North Vietnamese, who although they were always responsible for the direction and provisioning of the war, did depend heavily up until recently on indigenous units. In the space of a little more than a year, the ratio almost exactly reversed, from 70 per cent SVN and 30 NVN, to the exact opposite. One might call it the North Vietnamization of the war. All the more discouraging that the defection rate is so low among the most crucial element in the current struggle.

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More bad news. Although the enemy, as we shall see, is reeling from successive disasters, he retains the technical capacity to regenerate himself at about the rate at which we have been killing him. An estimated 100,000 healthy males not desig-

nated for specialized training turn 18 every year. That is about how many soldiers, on an average, have been killed per year over the course of the war.

The bright side of it, in the macabre figuring of the military statisticians, is that something like an entire generation of North Vietnamese males has been killed during the past seven or eight years. The sobering side is that they grow 'em as fast as we kill them. One recalls the bloodchilling comment of Wellington surveying the carnage after a great battle against Napoleon in Spain, and sniffing that the English dead were no greater than the number of men who would be conceived the next Saturday night in London.

The enemy, the North Vietnamese, have enough men left over to keep 50,000 of them engaged in Laos, where as in South Vietnam, they shoulder the overwhelming burden of pressing their imperialism. Did I forget to mention that there are only 75,000 Viet Cong? Moreover—another grim statistic—the material that crosses the borders of North Vietnam, en route to the slaughter of Americans and South Vietnamese, does so with less than the difficulty—thanks to Lyndon Johnson's suspension of the bombing—than an American tourist experiences in crossing over, say, to Canada.

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We are talking, for the most part, about Soviet goods; Soviet weapons, Soviet trucks, Soviet oil. Two figures, purely suggestive. There are more North Vietnamese infiltrating into South Vietnam right now, than in 1966 or 1967. As of Dec. 1, 4500 vehicles were landed in support of the Communists, which is 800 more than the figure for a year ago. During October alone, 52,000 tons of fuel went in to North Vietnam, a figure which I reduce, straining the limits of my mathematical prowess, to approximately 15 million gallons.

It is generally supposed that all of the infiltration of the goods of war comes down through Laos and the Ho Chi Minh trail, and then insinuates east across the long South Vietnamese frontier. In fact a great deal of material laps into the port of Sihanoukville in Cambodia, and treks its way leisurely east into the southernmost area of Vietnam, the delta region, which is what the war is all about, that being where the rice is.

Why, why, we do not ourselves close off that port, or, with a salute to Vietnamization, why we do not give the South Vietnamese the means to do so, remains a mystery, too subtle for me or Spiro Agnew to understand.

But the point is made. The enemy neither has to give up, nor is, apparently, disposed to give up. Which does not mean that we are not winning the war, achieving our objectives, and facing, in a controlled situation, far brighter prospects. We are, in fact; so stay tuned.