

Guesstimate of a

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SAIAGON—In Vietnam, all things flow from the "estimate of the situation." The decisions on troop levels and aid funds, and on the crucial matter of American priorities, depend on where the Administration thinks it is and where it thinks it is going. This estimate is a matter of tone, almost of psychology, and it is the responsibility of the American Mission in Saigon.

The head of the Mission, who must assemble and defend the estimate, is Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker. From field reports and his personal feel of

the situation, he writes a weekly "eyes only" cable to President Johnson on the evolving political situation, the mood of the Vietnamese government, the chronic economic crisis, the plight of the refugees and the potential and capacities of the militant Buddhists. And on the war.

Whatever else it is, Vietnam is first and foremost a war, and the man who supplies the measurements for the estimate of it is the commander of the 440,000 American troops in Vietnam, Gen. William C. Westmoreland. If there were not a war, there would be no dead Americans, and if there were no dead

Americans, there would be little concern in the United States.

So while wise men here declare that in the long run it is political evolution that is of crucial importance, right now it is a matter of the Marine Corps and the intentions of the enemy fighting on Hill 881. How long will he hold out? What is his strategy?

Less than 100,000 words in classified cables pass between the U.S. Embassy and Washington each month. The military wordage measures into the millions, and from all the wordage, the Johnson Administration finds the estimates and proceeds from there to its priorities, and its policies.

No Agreed Estimate

THE WAR IS BEING fought on so many different fronts that there is no agreed estimate of the situation and therefore only the fuzziest sense of where the United States is and where it is going, and whether the war is being won or lost. Reflective sources here contend that this is because there is very little agreement on what kind of war it is, and almost no agreement at all on the measurement of its success or failure.

In this Alice's wonderland, the race is most often won by the man who can bring the simplest logic to bear. Prime Minister Ky was once asked what kind of war it was and replied, smiling, "A war against the Vietcong."

The answer satisfied him, and would satisfy many Vietnamese, but it isn't enough for Sen. Fulbright or Secretary McNamara.

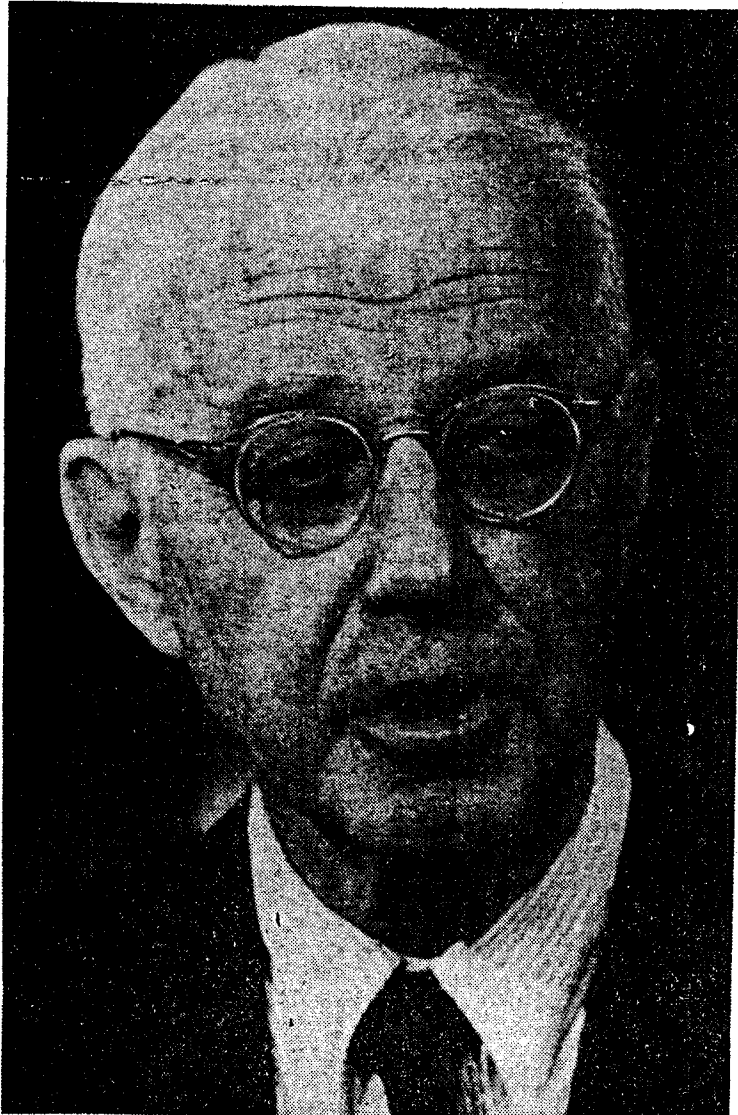
The matter of measurements goes close to the heart of the matter:

In the tiny delta province of Vinh-long, there is a top priority project to open the Manghit Nicolai Canal to commercial traffic. Great controversy now swirls around the canal because the American civilian adviser on the project declares that security is insufficient and the project is doomed to failure because enemy main-force battalions will attack the barges. The American military adviser hotly disagrees.

Neither man can agree on a definition of security, and therefore the matter has been referred to Saigon—which, of course, has no definition either.

The Dead Don't Disappear

A SOURCE OF MAJOR bewilderment among American civilians is the enemy force level. The estimate of it remains constant (about 280,000 men) despite 1500 enemy dead a week, 1000 Chieu Hoi returnees a month, an X factor of enemy wounded, a Y factor of



Ellsworth Bunker . . . a weekly "eyes only" cable to the President.

Situation

enemy sick and a Z factor of enemy desertions. One knowledgeable civilian official challenged the figures, issued by Brig. Gen. Joseph C. McChristian, Westmoreland's intelligence officer. Something, he said, had to be amiss. Either kills were overestimated or infiltration underestimated, but there could not be that many enemy losses without some corresponding loss in his overall strength.

McChristian turned to his bank of computers and the following day produced a revision in the factor estimating enemy wounded, thus bringing the statistics into mathematical balance.

The fact is that no one knows much about infiltration, or the level of security, or a dozen other critical elements which make up the estimate. The American military machine has been excellent at predicting enemy main-force intentions (thus, Westmoreland's successful strategy of "spoiling" attacks) but has not been conspicuously successful at judging the guerrilla infrastructure, for example, or at overall estimates on the progress of the war.

The problem, as military officials have noted, is that many of these are intangibles, difficult to unearth and not soluble by numbers fed into computers.

The history of American estimates of the situation is of overoptimism. The chief offender has been the American military command, notably Westmoreland's predecessor, Gen. Paul D. Harkins, and it is suspected that the difficulty lies in the yardsticks used to measure progress. Military officers often use World War II measurements for a war which bears little resemblance to that or any other war.

American troop levels have been consistently underestimated, but officials here declare that Washington must bear part of the responsibility. Two successive Administrations have insisted on fighting a war without disturbing the American electorate.

Civilians Aren't Special

EVEN THOUGH the military is criticized, no one feels that civilians possess special wisdom. American officials here were dismayed and saddened at Robert W. Komer's celebrated report to President Johnson because of its optimistic tone and the statistics it cited. Statistics, as one American official put it, are the bane of the American effort here because they are seldom related to anything and infrequently successful as a measurement.

The Chieu Hoi returnee rate of Vietcong defectors is great and growing, but



Gen. Westmoreland . . . supplies the "measurements" of the war.

no senior official appears to know what, if anything, it means. It is better that the rate be high than low, but beyond that officials are loath to guess because too little is known of returnee motivation.

There is little evidence here of pressure on American officials to cook facts and figures to please either the President or his subordinates. Where the disagreements often arise is over priorities, with Washington often more bullish on a statistic (the Chieu Hoi rate, for example) than Saigon. The Saigon mentality is more cautious (or, as officials here prefer to say, realistic), which may be one reason why the President decided to change the entire top civilian team last month.

Government officials publicly put the best face on events but privately, where it counts, men here have a reputation for candor. The startling and

useful information not long ago that 50 per cent of the revolutionary development cadres were considered substandard came not from a news leak or from a third-country analysis but from one of the highest American officials in Saigon at a background briefing for correspondents.

The American country team has yet to sort out the wise from the foolish voices in Vietnam, to decide whom to believe and whom not to believe and to construct a workable calculus for the measurement of progress or its reverse.

The result is something like a Tower of Babel, which the cables to Washington probably reflect in some degree. One official believes that is not necessarily a bad thing and not an adverse reflection on Saigon officials. Vietnam is not tidy, and the cables only reflect reality. The sound and fury have not yet yielded significance.