

Vietnam Papers: Doubt Cast on View That

Under the heading "Origins of the Insurgency in South Vietnam," the Pentagon's study analyzes the Vietcong movement and its role in the development of the war. The following article, by Fox Butterfield, describes the analysts' findings.

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the North Imposed War

The secret Pentagon study of the Vietnam war says the United States Government's official view that the war was imposed on South Vietnam by aggression from Hanoi is "not wholly compelling."

Successive administrations in Washington, from President John F. Kennedy to President Richard M. Nixon, have used this interpretation of the origins of the war to justify American intervention in Vietnam. But American intelligence estimates during the nineteen-fifties show, the Pentagon account says, that the war began largely as a rebellion in the South against the increasingly oppressive and corrupt regime of Ngo Dinh Diem.

"Most of those who took up arms were South Vietnamese and the causes for which they fought were by no means contrived in North Vietnam," the Pentagon account says of the years from 1956 to 1959, when the insurgency began.

But the study also disputes many critics of American policy in Vietnam who have contended that North Vietnam became involved in the South only after 1965 in response to large-scale American intervention.

"It is equally clear that North Vietnamese Communists operated some form of subordinate apparatus in the South in the years 1954-1960," the Pentagon study says.

And in 1959, the account continues, Hanoi made a clear decision to assert its control over the growing insurgency and to increase its infiltration of trained cadres from the North. Thereafter, the study says, "Hanoi's involvement in the developing strife became evident."

'Authoritarian, Inflexible, Remote'

Developments related to the origins of the war that are disclosed by the Pentagon history include the following:

¶ American officials in Saigon, including those in the embassy, the Central Intelligence Agency and the military command were fully aware of President Diem's shortcomings. They regularly reported to Washington that he was "authoritarian, inflexible and remote," that he entrusted power only to his own family and that he had alienated all elements of the population by his oppressive policies.

¶ From 1954 to 1958 North Vietnam concentrated on its internal development, apparently hoping to achieve reunification either through the elections provided for in the Geneva settlement or through the natural collapse of the weak Diem regime. The Communists left behind a skeletal apparatus in the South when they regrouped to North Vietnam in 1954 after the war with the French ended, but the cadre members were ordered to engage only in "political struggle."

¶ In the years before 1959 the Diem regime was nearly successful in wiping out the agents, who felt constrained by their orders not to fight back. Their fear and anger at being caught in this predicament, however, apparently led them to begin the insurgency against Mr. Diem, despite their orders, sometime during 1956-57.

North Vietnam's leaders formally decided in May, 1959, at the 15th meeting of the Lao Dong (Communist) party's Central Committee, to take control of the growing insurgency. Captured Vietcong personnel and documents report that as a result of the decision the Ho Chi Minh Trail of supply lines was prepared, southern cadre members who had been taken North were infiltrated back

to the South and the tempo of the war suddenly speeded up.

The Pentagon account says that both American intelligence and Vietcong prisoners attributed the Vietcong's rapid success after 1959 to the Diem regime's mistakes.

In a report prepared by the Rand Corporation of Santa Monica, Calif., on the interrogation of 23 Vietcong cadre members, one southern member said of the Communists' success:

"The explanation is not that the cadre were exceptionally gifted but the people they talked to were ready for rebellion. The people were like a mound of straw, ready to be ignited.

"If at that time the Government in the South had been a good one, if it had not been dictatorial, then launching the movement would have been difficult."

on the South

Encouragement of Hanoi Is Seen

A United States intelligence estimate of August, 1960, on the rapidly deteriorating situation in South Vietnam concluded:

"The indications of increasing dissatisfaction with the Diem government have probably encouraged the Hanoi regime to take stronger action at this time."

To emphasize how the Diem regime's oppressive and corrupt policies helped prepare the way for the insurgency in South Vietnam, the Pentagon study devotes a lengthy section to Mr. Diem's rule—as Premier from 1954 until late 1955 and then as President until he was overthrown in 1963.

When Mr. Diem took office in 1954, the account notes; it seemed for a while that he "did accomplish miracles," as his supporters contended.

To the surprise of most observers, he put down the Binh Xuyen gangster sect in Saigon and the Cao Dai and the Hoa Hao, armed sects in the countryside. He created a stable government and a loyal army where there had been only chaos. And he won diplomatic recognition for South Vietnam from many countries.

But from the beginning, the account says, President Diem's personality and political concepts tended to decrease his Government's effectiveness.

The product of a family that was both zealously Roman Catholic and a member of the traditional Mandarin ruling class, Mr. Diem was authoritarian, moralistic, inflexible, bureaucratic and suspicious. His mentality is described in the account as like that of a "Spanish Inquisitor."

His political machine was a "rigidly organized, overcentralized family oligarchy." He trusted only his family members, particularly his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu, who had organized the semi-secret Can Lao party.

Chose to Rule 'With Firm Hand'

An American intelligence estimate of May, 1959, described the situation as follows:

"President Diem continues to be the undisputed ruler of South Vietnam; all important and many minor decisions are referred to him.

"Although he professes to believe in representative government and democracy, Diem is convinced that the Vietnamese are not ready for such a political system and that he must rule with a firm hand, at least so long as nation security is threatened.

"He also believes that the country cannot afford a political opposition which could obstruct or dilute the Government's efforts to establish a strong rule. He remains a somewhat austere and remote figure to most Vietnamese and has not generated widespread popular enthusiasm.

"Diem's regime reflects his ideas. A facade of representative government is maintained, but the Government is in fact essentially authoritarian.

"The legislative powers of the National Assembly are strictly circumscribed; the judiciary is undeveloped and sub-

ordinate to the executive; and the members of the executive branch are little more than the personal agents of Diem.

"No organized opposition, loyal or otherwise, is tolerated, and critics of the regime are often repressed."

To make matters worse, according to the account, Mr. Diem's programs designed to increase security in the countryside were carried out so badly that they "drove a wedge not between the insurgents and the farmers, but between the farmers and the Government, and eventuated in less rather than more security."

The Civic Action program, designed to help the Government in Saigon establish communication with the peasants, went astray when President Diem used northern refugees and Catholics almost exclusively to go into the villages. To the peasants these Civic Action team members were outsiders.

The Diem land-reform program, instead of redistributing land to the poor, ended up taking back what the peasants had been given by the Vietminh and returning it to the landlords. In 1960, 75 per cent of the land was still owned by 15 per cent of the people.

Mr. Diem abolished the traditional elected village councils out of fear that Communists might gain power in them. Then he replaced these popular bodies with appointed outsiders, northern refugees and Catholics loyal to him.

In the so-called anti-Communist denunciation campaign, which was begun in the summer of 1955, from 50,000 to 100,000 people were put in detention camps. But, the account says, many of the detainees were not Communists at all.

President Diem also ordered a number of population-relocation programs to increase security, but these too backfired, it says.

Montagnard tribesmen who were

forced to leave their traditional homelands in the Central Highlands for more settled and secure areas made easy recruits for the Vietcong, the chronicle relates, and peasants who were forced to move out of their ancestral villages and build new ones in the so-called agrovillage program resented the Saigon Government.

Despite "Diem's preoccupation with security," the account says, "he poorly provided for police and intelligence in the countryside"; the Self-Defense Corps and Civil Guard—both militia groups—were "poorly trained and equipped, miserably led."

"Their brutality, petty thievery and disorderliness induced innumerable villagers to join in open revolt against Diem," the account continues.

By curbing freedom of speech and jailing dissidents, the history says, Mr. Diem alienated the intellectuals; by promoting officers on the basis of loyalty to his family rather than on the basis of ability, he alienated large segments of the armed forces.

Looking at the Diem Government's growing problems in January, 1960, the United States Embassy concluded in a "Special Report on the Internal Security Situation in Vietnam":

"The situation may be summed up in the fact that the Government has tended to treat the population with suspicion or to coerce it and has been rewarded with an attitude of apathy and resentment.

"The basic factor which has been lacking is a feeling of rapport between the Government and the population. The people have not identified themselves with the Government."

The report pointed to this "growth of apathy and considerable dissatisfaction among the rural populace" as a major cause of the insurgency.