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Vietnam: Those Computer Reports

On December 1 in Saigon, Robert W. Komer, chief of the US pacification program, announced that two-thirds of the people of South Vietnam now live in secure areas under South Vietnamese government control. The basis given for this statement is data analyzed by the new computerized Hamlet Evaluation System in the US Embassy in Saigon.

What comes out of the computer, of course, is only as good as the information which goes into it; and the Vietnam Hamlet Estimates fed into Komer's electronic gadget are neither accurate nor honest. The estimates of conditions in approximately 13,000 hamlets are made each month by US Army officers who are advisers to Vietnamese district chiefs. I estimate that 99 percent of the advisers have neither the language facility nor the knowledge of Vietnamese culture to know what is happening within their own districts. Those who have been to language school have learned only a smattering of Vietnamese; and, usually, it is the wrong dialect, because their Vietnamese language instructors mostly have been Northerners. They may impress visitors by rattling off "Hello," "Goodbye," "How are you?" to the peasants; but that's about the extent of their language skills.

It is from Vietnamese interpreters that the US Army advisers receive almost all their information about the hamlets. But the interpreters also are incompetent to evaluate village conditions. Not only is their first loyalty to the Vietnamese district chiefs—whose job is to make things "look good"—but also a large proportion of them are Northerners who speak a different dialect from the Southern peasants. Even if the peasants understand them, they are traditionally suspicious of Northerners and frequently do not give honest answers. An additional irony is that the interpreters usually do not speak enough English to understand or report adequately to the Americans who employ them. I have interviewed many interpreters (and recorded the dialogues so that others could check on me); a majority of them know only from 300 to 500 words of English.

Everything is against the evaluation techniques used by the Americans in Vietnam. For the Vietnamese to survive, he must tell the interrogator what he wants to hear. This is the best way of being left alone by the "outsiders" who have been criss-crossing the land for the last five generations. Such behavior has become part of Vietnamese life. It is impossible to know what is on a peasant's mind unless one can hear and understand him while he is gossiping as freely as he would with his family and neighbors. Naturally neither the

US Army advisers, their interpreters, nor the current Saigon government, has this capability.

Recent television newsreels have shown US reporters—via interpreters—interviewing Vietnamese peasants. I have been watching these telecasts with a Vietnamese friend, a Southerner. He informs me that frequently the Vietnamese interpreter has not repeated the question exactly as the American interviewer has asked it; that the peasant has not responded to the question put by the interpreter; and that the interpreter has not repeated accurately in English what the peasant has said. It is through similar daisy chains of misinformation—only far worse—that Komer's computer is operating.

I have visited some of the so-called "secure villages." With the exception of a few rigged showcases reserved for the press and distinguished visitors, I found them not secure and their inhabitants not supporting the government. In the majority of villages, conditions are so precarious that at night the government's revolutionary development workers often flee to the safety of the district headquarters or to the nearest city. Often the village chief, if he has been appointed by Ky or was elected under a Ky-controlled election, also leaves the village at night. The villages appear secure only during the day, if there are South Vietnamese troops nearby. When the South Vietnamese or US troops are moved, members of the revolutionary development teams disappear. My own estimate is that this is true for about 70 percent of Vietnam.

The proof of pacification is in the sleeping. If and when Ambassador Komer and his colleagues, both Vietnamese and American, can stay in villages at night and sleep there undisturbed, then they will know that perhaps the village is nearing pacification. I predict that the ambassador and his friends, if they tried this today, would get precious little sleep—or security.

Another thing for Komer to chew on, when he announces progress in security and pacification, concerns food. The 2.5 million residents of the Saigon area now are eating rice grown in Louisiana and South Carolina, pork which has been brought in from Denmark, and frozen chicken and fish from the United States. Only a few years ago, Vietnam exported 800,000 tons of rice. In 1968, the United States will have to send in about 1.2 million tons of rice to stop a famine. The shortage is due to several factors, including the fear of the villagers which keeps them out of their fields much of the time and the fact that the Viet Cong appropriates much of the crop. While our troops were diverted from the rice areas by the battle

at Dak To, the Viet Cong made off with two-thirds of the harvest of one entire valley region.

The "computer ruse" is one method offered by the government to talk the public into a false optimism. The other technique - which has been used in the past - is the "numbers game." Bunker, Komer, Westmoreland, Rostow and Company have told us how many South Vietnamese are under government control - about 12 million.

The 12 million figure is arrived at by adding together the approximately four million refugees and about one million Vietnamese, who directly or indirectly work for the United States; the approximately million more who are in the South Vietnamese Army, the National Police, and other paramilitary organizations; and the 2.4 million inhabitants of Saigon. This subtotal amounts to eight million, or 50 percent of the total population. This then is added to the four million living in areas where there are South Vietnamese and US troops. From the grand total comes the misleading conclusion that the government controls 70 percent of the population. It is spurious, for it evades the central question: "How many South Vietnamese support the government?" The four million refugees of various sorts have been thrown or bombed out of



"After we're liberated, we'll be pacified."

their homes. They do not support the government. They certainly do not support us. Quite the contrary. Conservatively, perhaps one-third of the South Vietnamese government is infiltrated by members of the National Liberation Front, or is sympathetic to the Front. One indication of this is that 8,000 to 10,000 South Vietnamese soldiers desert every month. Three-quarters of them take their weapons with them.

One asks, "How then is the war continuing?" The answer is simple: the war is continuing because it is advantageous for the people in the Saigon government to have it continue. For example, the gold holdings of Vietnam (a nation in a major, total war) have increased in three years from \$130 million to \$450 million. This represents only the visible surplus and indicates tremendous under-the-table manipulation by the Vietnamese. Anyone wishing to explore this further should read the testimony of Rutherford Poat, deputy administrator of foreign aid, in the September 19, 1967 *Congressional Record*.

In addition to the visible increase in Saigon's gold reserve, approximately \$18 billion, according to many Swiss and Chinese informants, has been sent to foreign banks by private Vietnamese individuals since 1956. Not so long ago, Madame Nhu purchased outright the second largest bank in Paris. For cash.

Why kill the US goose which lays golden eggs?

Ambassador Komer, who is in charge of pacification and whose integrity is respected by all who know him, finds himself in a difficult, perhaps untenable, position. First, he has accepted responsibility for a program which has been a failure since 1956. Second, the US military in Saigon resented his coming - after all, he is a civilian. The military has, with bureaucratic guile, blocked him while outwardly welcoming him, by such little tricks as seeing to it that Komer and his large staff had only one telephone in their offices for over three weeks. The military has all the physical assets. Komer gives commands but is dependent upon Westmoreland and AID to carry them out.

Meanwhile, Washington has been badgering Komer to supply the nation with good news. But he had no real successes to report. Instead, he has had some frightening failures. As measured by all but the computer, the battle of Dak To was an American failure and a great Viet Cong victory, in that it diverted rice from friend to foe - far more important than the capture of a hilltop. Komer is too valuable a man to become compromised and corrupted in this manner. In my opinion, he should report the truth; and if he does not have this freedom, then he should resign.

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