

Foreign Affairs: The Strategy of Error — I

By C. L. SULZBERGER

PARIS—The reason we are now in such a mess in Vietnam is that we haven't yet recognized the kind of war we are fighting and therefore haven't yet adjusted our strategy to the enemy's. The United States is engaged in a military campaign aided by various kinds of new devices and tactics. But the Vietcong and North Vietnam are engaged in a type of combat called "Revolutionary Warfare" in which military action is only one of several coordinated factors including political, diplomatic and economic.

The New Techniques

Three years ago, when General Taylor was Ambassador in Saigon, I wrote: "U.S.-Indochina strategy is more heavily marked by the Pentagon than by the State Department. . . . The modern elaboration of guerrilla techniques called 'Revolutionary Warfare' by the Communists does not depend on heavy weapons or atomic arsenals. It depends upon simultaneous organization of partisan units and civilian administrators who seek to rot a selected country from within like fungus inside an apparently healthy tree.

"Even today, when we have growing special forces, counter

guerrilla units, some with kindergarten training in Revolutionary Warfare, we are abysmally behind. . . . And we have nothing capable of offsetting what Revolutionary Warfare calls 'parallel hierarchies' (known in Vietnam as dich-van)—the secret political apparatus that undermines morale and softens up the population. . . .

An American Way

"We have, furthermore, been preoccupied with selling an American way of life and political philosophy unsuited to the people we would help. The heart of the crisis is not truly in Vietnam. The quintessential problem is how to defeat Revolutionary Warfare."

Recent events have unfortunately justified this dismal analysis. Whatever happens, it is clear we haven't yet learned what Revolutionary Warfare really is and therefore cannot master it. We have fielded in Vietnam perhaps the best and certainly the best-equipped army in U.S. history, but alone it is not enough.

The "pacification" program designed to win over areas menaced by the Vietcong is in shreds. We have never succeeded in developing our own parallel hierarchies and the only Saigon Government that

did, that of the dictatorial Ngo Dinh Diem, was overthrown with our encouragement when it became absolutely corrupted by its absolute power.

At the root of American policy, no matter how ineptly expressed, is the desire to stabilize the fluid situation in Southeast Asia along some line between northern dynamism and incipient southern chaos—to achieve a power balance within which the Orient can live. Ideology is not the preclusive aspect. Admirable as democracy may be for highly educated, prosperous Western peoples with long traditions of self-government, it is doctrinally unsuitable to most Asians, who, by custom and philosophical heritage, are used to imposed authority.

Different Approach Indicated

Whatever we prefer, this trend is likely to continue on either side of the ideological curtain—whether in North or South Korea, China, Burma or Thailand. I am not sure what kind of political approach we should sponsor, but it is evident the one we have endorsed is no huge success. It is equally evident we must oppose the non-military aspects of Revolutionary Warfare with better non-military counters.

Prof. Edwin O. Reischauer, former United States Ambassador to Japan and a serious student of Asia, concludes we have lost this war in terms of our original objective, which he sees as similar to those described in my column of March 3, 1965, cited above. For Reischauer that objective was to prove "so-called wars of national liberation do not pay."

Meeting the Challenge

I am not prepared to concede we have necessarily lost the war, even in those terms, if we make up our minds now to ascertain precisely what kind of war it is and then meet the challenge in all dimensions. But Washington, since 1961, has been confused about "Revolutionary Warfare," determined to view it only in terms of military tactics and weapons without sufficient understanding of the human engineering in which our adversaries specialize.

It is very, very late. As will be noted in a subsequent column, it is not only late to win the Vietnam war but also late to lose it. The consequences to the U.S.A. both abroad and at home could be immeasurable. Yet they will become immutable if the strategy of error is pursued to the bitter end.