

A Spurt of Optimism

Whatever public uneasiness was expressed in the news-conference questions, the Pentagon study notes, official American assessments on the war in the spring and summer of 1962 took on an increasingly favorable tenor.

One special object of praise and of American official confidence, the account notes, was the development of the strategic hamlet program as an all-embracing counterinsurgency strategy in rural Vietnam. But the Pentagon study comments that the optimism proved misplaced.

Government documents available in the Pentagon records describe this strategy as a program to regroup the Vietnamese population into fortified hamlets in which the Government was to undertake political, social and economic measures designed both to weed out Vietcong sympathizers and to gain popular allegiance through improved local services and better security.

President Diem formally adopted the strategy for the Mekong Delta in mid-March, 1962, and made it nationwide in August. By Sept. 30, according to the study, the Diem Government was stating that more than a third of the total rural population was living in completed hamlets.

One flaw inherent in this strategy, the Pentagon study asserts, was that Saigon and Washington had different objectives for it: President Diem saw it as a means of controlling his population, non-Communist as well as Communist, while Washington saw it as a means of winning greater allegiance and thereby squeezing out the Vietcong.

Vietnamese Exaggerated Reports

Moreover, the account goes on, popular allegiance was so difficult to assess that even American officials turned increasingly to physical aspects of the program for statistical evaluations of progress. It left them vulnerable, the study notes, to exaggerated Vietnamese reports, which they did not uncover until after the Diem Government had been overthrown in 1963.

Fundamentally, the Pentagon analysts assert, the strategic hamlets "failed dismally," like previous programs tried by the French and the Vietnamese, "because they ran into resentment if not active resistance" from peasants who objected to being moved forcibly from their fields and their ancestral homes.

The Pentagon study lays "a principal responsibility for the unfounded optimism of U.S. policy" in 1962 and early 1963 on inadequate and relatively uninformed American intelligence and reporting systems. The official optimism, the Pentagon account discloses, reached its peak in the plans for an American military "phase-out" in Vietnam on the assumption that the war against the Vietcong would be won by the end of 1965.

The tone was set, the analyst writes at a Honolulu conference on Vietnam strategy. On July 23, 1962, the same day that the Laotian peace agreement was signed in Geneva, Secretary McNamara ordered the start of planning for American withdrawal from Vietnam and long-term projections for reducing American financial aid to the Saigon Government.

Mr. McNamara is depicted in the study as repeatedly pressing the somewhat reluctant military command to come up with a long-range plan for an American phase-out, in part because of satisfaction with what he called the "tremendous progress" in early 1962.

But Mr. McNamara's orders also reflected domestic political problems. At the Honolulu conference, the account says, "he observed that it might be difficult to retain public support for U.S. operations indefinitely."

"Political pressures would build up as losses continued," it added.

Divergent Estimates of Cost

The Pentagon account gives no indication that this planning was personally originated by President Kennedy or that it was ever presented to him in completed form. For roughly 18 months, with little urgency, documents flowed back and forth between Mr. McNamara and the American military mission in Saigon through Pentagon channels, with Mr. McNamara constantly urging lower budget figures and reduction to 1,500 American troops by late 1968. Even so, the President was told in February, 1963, by a senior White House aide, Michael V. Forrestal, to expect a long and costly war.

"No one really knows," Mr. Forrestal

wrote in a report to Mr. Kennedy on Feb. 11, "how many of the 20,000 'Vietcong' killed last year were only innocent, or at least persuadable, villagers, whether the strategic hamlet program is providing enough govt. services to counteract the sacrifices it requires, or how the mute mass of villagers react to the charges against Diem of dictatorship and nepotism." The report, which accompanied the Pentagon study, went on to say that Vietcong recruitment inside South Vietnam was so effective that the war could be continued even without infiltration from the North.

Moreover, while the phase-out planning continued, the American involvement grew to 16,732 men in October, 1963. And the analyst comments that once the political struggle began in earnest against President Diem in May, 1963, this planning took on an "absurd quality" based on "the most Micawberesque predictions" of progress.

"Strangely," the Pentagon study continues, "as a result of the public White House promise in October and the power of the wheels set in motion, the U.S. did effect a 1,000-man withdrawal in December of 1963." But the study discounts this as "essentially an accounting exercise" offset in part by troop rotations.

Because of the complete political upheaval against the Diem regime in 1963, the situation deteriorated so profoundly in the final five months of the Kennedy Administration, according to a private report from Secretary McNamara quoted in the study, that the entire phase-out had to be formally dropped in early 1964.

Thus, the Pentagon study relates, in spite of the military build-up under the Kennedy Administration, President Kennedy left President Johnson a Vietnamese legacy of crisis, of political instability and of military deterioration at least as alarming to policy makers as the situation he had inherited from the Eisenhower Administration.

Decision 'Almost by Default'

The decision to build up the combat support and advisory missions, the Pentagon study comments, was made "almost by default" because the Kennedy Administration was focused so heavily in the fall of 1961 on the question of sending ground combat units to Vietnam. That decision, the analyst writes, was reached "without extended study or debate" or precise expectation of what it would achieve.

Despite the tens of thousands of words in the Pentagon account of the Kennedy Administration, backed by scores of documents, the study does not provide a conclusive answer to the most vigorously debated question about President Kennedy's Vietnam policy since his death in November, 1963: If President Kennedy had lived until 1965, would he have felt compelled by events, as President Johnson was, to undertake full-scale land war in South Vietnam and an air war against the North?

The situation, as the Pentagon account discloses, had changed significantly between 1961 and 1965. In 1961 President Kennedy was confronted by other crises—Berlin, Cuba, Laos—while he faced his harshest decisions on Vietnam, and these acted as restraints; President Johnson did not have quite the same distractions elsewhere. Too, President Diem never pushed so aggressively for American escalation as did Gen. Nguyen Khanh, the South Vietnamese leader in 1964 and 1965. Nor, as the analysts note, had other measures short of full-scale air and ground combat been exhausted, without producing success.

The Pentagon account, moreover, presents the picture of an unbroken chain of decision-making from the final months of the Kennedy Administration into the early months of the Johnson Administration, whether in terms of the political view of the American stakes in Vietnam, the advisory build-up or the hidden growth of covert warfare against North Vietnam.

"No reliable inference can be drawn," the Pentagon study concludes, "about how Kennedy would have behaved in 1965 and beyond had he lived. (One of those who had advised retaining freedom of action on the issue of sending U.S. combat troops was Lyndon Johnson.) It does not prove that Kennedy behaved soundly in 1961. Many people will think so; but others will argue that the most difficult problem of recent years might have been avoided if the U.S. had made a hard commitment on the ground in South Vietnam in 1961."