

U.S. Aides in Saigon Question Policy

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The following assessment of the situation in Indochina was written by the chief of the Saigon bureau of The New York Times, who has just completed a 15-month assignment in South Vietnam.

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SAIGON, South Vietnam June 1—There is widespread doubt among the most experienced American observers in South Vietnam that current United States policies will bring lasting peace.

Although 110,000 American troops have been withdrawn from Vietnam and enormous strides have been made in

pacification in the last 18 months, the United States still faces vast problems in extricating itself.

At the root of the pessimistic

outlook are serious and widely held doubts about the following:

¶The efficacy of the Vietnamization program, which has yet to face major challenges.

¶The wisdom of the extension of the war into Cambodia, which, despite the immediate military gains it may achieve, seems likely to complicate American efforts to disengage and may eventually involve the United States—step by painful step—in the defense of yet another weak and uncertain government.

¶The effectiveness of the Saigon Government in dealing with increasingly serious economic and political problems in South Vietnam.

¶The nature of the progress achieved in the pacification program, which remains fragile and subject to the enemy's will.

Finally, there is a conviction that United States policies fail to come to grips with the central element in the Vietnam puzzle: the need for a negotiated political settlement that reflects the true balance of power among the Vietnamese people.

"We won't solve this war by cleaning out the base areas in Cambodia, or even by replacing American troops with South Vietnamese," an American who has spent five years in Vietnam said the other day.

"We have to go to the heart of the matter and find an acceptable way of distributing political power among the Vietnamese. That's what the fighting is all about, and it won't stop until we solve it."

The skepticism about American policy is shared in many

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quarters in Vietnam—by young, dedicated Americans working at the province and district level, and by independent observers, including journalists and foreign diplomats. It is greatest among those whose jobs permit them to travel around Vietnam.

The attitude is also evident among educated, independent South Vietnamese, people outside the Government who are deeply concerned about the future of their country after the American disengagement.

A Trace of Bitterness

Through the remarks of all those people runs a common theme: No lasting peace is possible without a political solution.

"Vietnamization, by itself, won't produce any kind of peace in this country, just or otherwise," a 31-year-old major who works as a district adviser in the pacification program said recently with more than a trace of bitterness.

"Unless it is matched by some sort of political settlement, Vietnamization just means that the fighting will go on and on. But instead of Americans killing Vietnamese, you'll have Vietnamese killing Vietnamese."

Many people here, like the major, acknowledge that Vietnamization will eventually get American soldiers off the battlefield—though not necessarily out of the country—but they insist that it will not end the war or produce a just peace.

Behind that belief is the conviction that the enemy continues to have the necessary strength, spirit, manpower and determination to continue the struggle in South Vietnam—and Laos and Cambodia—for the foreseeable future. Few military men here dispute that assessment of the Communists' capability.

Lost in the Furor

President Nixon's offer, in his address April 20, to discuss at the Paris peace talks "a fair political solution [reflecting] the existing relationship of political forces in South Vietnam" had barely begun to sink in when it was lost in the furor caused by the invasion of Cambodia 10 days later. It may have been, as one American here described it, "the first casualty of Nixon's decision to go into Cambodia."

The senior members of the American military command are visibly defensive about the Cambodian operation and the controversy it has caused. They insist that it was a militarily justifiable tactical operation that got caught up in larger strategic and political questions.

Gen. Creighton W. Abrams, commander of United States forces in Vietnam, has indicated to friends that he feels that President Nixon drastically oversold the operation and enlarged its goals beyond realizable dimensions.

The general has said that the real purpose was to put a dent in the enemy's supply system and not, as Mr. Nixon suggested, to overrun and clean out the Communist headquarters.

The greatest peril in the Cambodian venture seems to lie in the period after June 30, when the Americans have withdrawn and the South Vietnamese are likely to continue their operations. The consensus here is that the President is going to find it far harder to get Americans out of Cambodia than it was to send them in.

Choice for Americans

In the short run the Americans may be faced with the choice of either going to the aid of the South Vietnamese or watching them flounder if they come under heavy pressure. In the long run the United States could find itself committed by proxy, as a result of South Vietnamese pledges and actions, to the defense of the shaky Government headed by Premier Lon Nol, which displaced Prince Norodom Sihanouk.

If the South Vietnamese become overextended in Cambodia, the Americans are going to find it correspondingly difficult to carry out their withdrawals from Vietnam on schedule.

Apart from the complications of the Cambodian venture, Vietnamization faces other serious problems. So far a total of 110,000 Americans have been

pulled out of Vietnam, leaving 429,000 behind. The real test will come in the next year, during which 150,000 more will have been withdrawn and the South Vietnamese are to take on the heavy fighting.

The first and most obvious danger is military. For the last four years the large American combat divisions have effectively manned the front lines. They have pursued the main North Vietnamese and Vietcong units relentlessly, gradually driving them from populated areas into the jungles and mountains along the Laotian and Cambodian borders.

As Vietnamization advances, the South Vietnamese divisions will take on the task while the remaining American units fall back into something approaching garrison duty. Their safety and that of an additional 250,000 or more Americans providing combat and logistical support will depend on the South Vietnamese.

Higher Toll Foreseen

Even conceding substantial improvement in the quality of the South Vietnamese armed forces, it is hard to imagine them coping with divisions of North Vietnamese regulars as effectively as the Americans did. The result may be significantly increased casualties—American as well as South Vietnamese—in the later stages of the withdrawal process.

Another consequence may be strikingly reduced security in certain areas of the countryside, most notably in the northern half of the country.

In the northernmost area, I Corps, the enemy has more than 20 battalions of fresh, well-equipped regulars in the vicinity of the demilitarized zone, and it has the capacity to reinforce them with up to three divisions at any time.

When the three divisions of Americans that are stationed there are withdrawn, the South Vietnamese will have to take on the job of patrolling along the demilitarized zone and protecting the coastal cities of Quangtri, Hue and Danang. At the very least, they will require reinforcements, and it is not clear from where additional troops would come.

There is a parallel situation in II Corps, the area south of the border region, where mountainous terrain and bad communications are a tangible asset for the enemy.

As a result of years of intensive allied operations, the Communists have been pushed from the heavily populated coastal plain into the mountains. Once the Americans are gone the South Vietnamese may be hard-pressed to keep them there.

Impact on Shaky Economy

Vietnamization will also have a drastic impact on South Vietnam's already shaky economic structure. The country earns more than 90 per cent of its foreign currency from Defense Department outlays and private spending by American soldiers. As the withdrawal proceeds the supply of dollars will be cut back just when they are most needed to bolster—a sorely weakened economy.

In addition, the approximately 145,000 Vietnamese who are directly employed by United States agencies and companies will have to find jobs.

Those bleak prospects are considered by knowledgeable people here to be a principal threat to the stability of the Government of President Nguyen Van Thieu.

The domestic political and economic situation has deteriorated dramatically in recent months. While the attention of the world has been riveted on Cambodia, Mr. Thieu has been coping with just about the noisiest political crisis since his election.

Rather than working to rally his non-Communist political opposition behind him, at the United States Embassy has been urging him to do lately, President Thieu has come down hard on any group that has challenged his authority or criticized his regime. Individuals with the temerity to speak out have been prosecuted and jailed. Groups that have expressed their complaints in public demonstrations have been tear-gassed and beaten by riot policemen.

Now there is a rising tide of criticism of the Government in newspapers and the National

Assembly that can only be expected to increase during the Senate election this fall and the presidential contest next year.

In addition, Mr. Thieu has failed to create anything approximating a national party that might be capable of mobilizing the country in preparation for a political battle with the Communists. Instead, his basic distrust of politicians—he was a general—and his reluctance to share power remain as great as ever.

As for the pacification program, there can be no question that enormous strides have been made during the last 18 months in the effort to extend the Government's control into the countryside. There is general agreement that the current program, which is the result of years of experimentation, mistakes and disappointments, is functioning better than any of its hapless forerunners.

But the progress in certain

provinces has been counterbalanced by setbacks in others. A proper pacification map of Vietnam would resemble a patchwork quilt, a mixture of bright and dark patches that produce a mottled impression over all.

The combination of problems—military, economic and political—guarantees that the American disengagement, particularly during the next year, will be a painful and troubled process.