

'The War Is Running

**A Gloomy
Report by
2 Experts**

The writers covered the Vietnam war from 1962 to 1970. They returned three weeks ago to report on the current North Vietnamese offensive.

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Associated Press*

Backward'

Saigon

What we have seen the last three weeks looks like a film strip of the preceding ten years reversed and rerun. The years peeled back as images of Vietnam at war flashed before our eyes.

One morning last week an American adviser for rural development held up a six-foot-long computer readout of his province's security rating that he had just received from Saigon.

"Look at this," he said, pointing to a bank of numbers. "That is supposed to give the current status of our Popular Force units. We cannot reach any of those units by radio; they have just gone. This paper is worthless."

He walked over to a chart detailing development plans for a score of hamlets in his northern districts. "We've lost them, too," he said turning the chart to the wall.

Elsewhere in the three major fighting areas we visited — the central highlands, the central coast, and Quang Tri province — the sense of swift, unexpected reversal was strong.

We arrived ten days after the North Vietnamese offensive began. Thrusts had been made deep into Quang Tri province. An Loc was under siege. The Kontum offensive was beginning.

Yet as we traveled we did not find what we expected. There was no real sense of emergency except in the town or unit under direct enemy pressure. Neither was there any sense of political unity in the cities against the threat.

Despite official claims that the Dong Ha line would hold south of the demilitarized zone, and that An Loc would not fall, we found among the Vietnamese military units we encountered a feeling of weakness.

There have been some dramatic acts of Vietnamese bravery. Reports abound of regional force soldiers defending their outposts to the last man, of district chiefs dying bravely at their posts. But after three weeks we find few positive developments of any significance.

Our first main impression was that the South Vietnamese have not stepped into the shoes of the departing Americans despite Vietnamization.

Before the collapse of the Dak To valley complex and the base camp defense line on Rocket ridge north of Kontum, a senior United States adviser pointed to the hills around Kontum and said: "Not one government soldier is out there. They are all in their bases. No one is patrolling. All that jungle is the enemy's. He will come right through it and cream us."



U.S. advisers leaving Quang Tri ran for a helicopter; others in foreground waited for another

LPT Telephoto

The North Vietnamese so far appear to be doing just that, not only in Konhinh but in War Zone C northwest of Saigon, in War Zone D to Saigon's northeast, and in dozens of other areas.

"The Saigon government is now paying the price of political military appointments," a senior American said.

The Vietnamese also are proving unable to handle the tools of American-style warfare. The communications system in Vietnam was never much good. Now it is beginning to crack.

Radar guidance systems at the nation's airports are beginning to malfunction, according to American technicians.

The helicopter was the backbone of the American effort. But the Vietnamese are wary of using the hundreds given them by Americans.

The elaborate American bases are rotting because they are far too big for the smaller Vietnamese units. Even multi-million-dollar Cam Ranh Bay is falling into disrepair. It was turned over to the Vietnamese officially yesterday but they have not found a use for it.

The traveler gets a strong impression that Vietnamization not only never worked but never happened, despite the American pull-out.

Americans who remain fall roughly in three categories.

There are those who are waiting out their time, like the infantrymen with the 196th Brigade at Phu Bai who don't relish being here but continue to do their duty. These include helicopter pilots, who are bearing a heavy load in the current fighting.

Then there are the civilian Americans who have put much of their lives into Vietnam, men like the senior American adviser to the Second Military Region, John Paul Vann. A ten-year Vietnam veteran, he is still trying to hold the situation together in the central highlands.

Finally, there are still a few military people who think they can win the war militarily. They range from desk-bound colonels in the Saigon headquarters, who brush off the Vietnamese reverses with an impatient shrug of their shoulders and an optimistic prediction, to some of the advisers in the field who look beyond the inefficiency and incompetence they see before their eyes.

But even the most enthusiastic Americans we met

shied away from the suggestion of bringing U.S. troops back into the war.

"This is a Viet show now," commented a colonel. "We brought them time with our men. It cost us blood. I hope the Viets used that time well."

DIFFERENCES

Much of that American blood was lost in rolling back the 1968 Tet offensive. The differences between that offensive and the current one are obvious.

The Tet attacks on all Vietnam's major cities and towns came from within, the road paved by Viet Cong agents and cadres who led troops into the hearts of the population centers. Many enemy forces were so slender in the Tet actions that they quickly lost communications and were eventually annihilated.

This time it is exclusively an attack from without, a

conventional push with massive firepower, overrunning everything in the way.

As far back as the early 1960s, there were never so few allied counter-offensives as now. Even in the grim days of 1965, when the Viet Cong army was knocking at the doors of Saigon, the government forces would organize a counter-attack to retake lost towns and villages. The same was true of the first few hours of the Tet offensive.

LESSON

One of the lessons of the Vietnam war is that if the enemy is given just a day to dig in, he is very difficult to dig out.

The South Koreans discovered this at the An Khe pass when poor patrolling allowed two North Vietnamese battalions to dig in along a critical ridgeline. The Koreans lost more than 100 dead in getting them out in a

two-week battle — one of the toughest for the Koreans in the whole war.

Another danger of leaving territory too long in the hands of the North Vietnamese is that it gives them an opportunity to organize the population.

Americans who have watched the scene closely fear that a minimum gain by the North Vietnamese will be control of large population centers along the coast and in the Mekong delta. This would give them a base to launch operations against government centers with locally recruited forces.

This was how the American phase of the Vietnam war began in 1962. The difference now is that the North Vietnamese have the lines of communications and the supplies to compress into a few months what it took years to achieve in the 1960s.