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INSURGENCY

By

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FOREWORD

This booklet is an abridged version of a lecture on "Counter-Insurgency" given by Brigadier (ret.) F. P. Serong at the Bangkok headquarters of the South-East Asia Treaty Organization on October 5, 1970.

A specialist on guerrilla and counter-insurgency operations in South-East Asia, Brigadier Serong conceived and developed the Australian Army Jungle Training Centre. Between 1962 and 1965 he commanded the Australian Force in Vietnam.

In 1965, he was loaned to the United States Government for operations in national development, security and political warfare. He is now a consultant in Vietnam to the Rand Corporation, the Hudson Institute and other bodies.

Lessons of Vietnam

THERE is only one good counter-insurgency operation and that is the one that never had to start. There is a sort of horrible decline in the need, in the approach of any government to a counter-insurgency situation. It starts with the realization, generally too late, that it has got a problem, a problem generally more a matter for the physician than a surgeon, until perhaps it gets too late and then becomes a surgical matter. Often the government which has the problem is one step behind all the time and, instead of leaping in quickly and doing something positive about it early, it generally tries to do too little too late and is always behind.

The first step for the government concerned is a domestic one. It is and should be the realization that the country concerned does indeed have a problem and that the first solutions to it are within its own hands by comparatively minor ameliorations of existing conditions.

If that step is not taken, the next step calls for the building up of the police internal security apparatus, particularly police intelligence or Police Special Branch. If that does not solve the problem, the next step is strong-arm action by clandestine police groups which in some areas are called Police Field Forces. Then, if that does not do the job, the authorities will have to call in minor tactical action and, if that is unsuccessful major tactical action. By the time there is minor tactical action, the situation is a mess. There is no way back at this point, except by calling on costly and massive aid, involving military assistance and support on a scale which could not be afforded by any South-East Asian country standing alone.

The lesson to be learnt from this is that a government should not let the country get on this slippery slope; the problem should be tackled off before the slide becomes too fast.

Vietnam is the horrible example of a situation that got out of hand. It is true that the insurgency was inspired from Hanoi, and it continues to be inspired and assisted from Hanoi, but there was a point in time when a certain course of action would have obviated the problems being faced by the Government of South Vietnam now. That point in time was just before 1960 when the Communist insurgent elements in South Vietnam began their campaign of selective terrorism.

At that point, there was a clear choice of building the police apparatus in the country or building the military apparatus; unfortunately the wrong choice was made. We can see that the police should have been built up, but in those days there were two reasons for selecting the military.

First, the military apparatus was the only effective arm of government in the country. The police itself was a very sick organization in Vietnam. It was organizationally a relic of the colonial past and was no sort of response to the condition in Vietnam.

The only body that could be developed rapidly enough to take an effective counter-action against the insurgency was the army. The army, in all good faith, set about tackling the job the way that the army would tackle an external enemy and its first problem was that its intelligence apparatus was not appropriate to the task. This apparatus is designed primarily towards order of battle—locating and identifying the enemy's power assets. But the power assets in an insurgency are not order-of-battle type assets. They are individuals and there was no way in which the army's

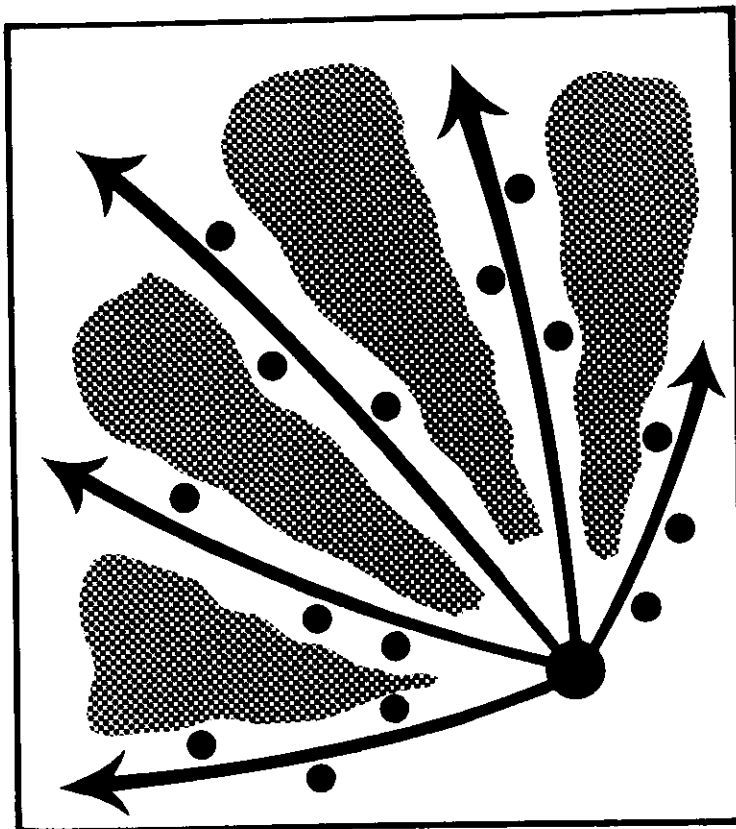
intelligence apparatus at that time could turn itself on to individual location, individual identification. Therefore the infra-structure of the insurgency got away to a flying start because the army was not capable of identifying either its personnel or its procedures and it allowed the insurgency to build itself up into larger tactical functional elements.




This was a point at which the army could respond more effectively. Once the enemy had built himself into slightly larger elements, the army was able to do something, but it never succeeded in catching up in the worsening situation.

The so-called Strategic Hamlets Programme had to be introduced; this was, in effect, a means of sorting out the people into areas in which they could be controlled by the government, indoctrinated by the government and removed from the influence of the enemy. It also denied the enemy the resources that he needed—resources in supplies, in personnel and in intelligence. In theory, the programme looked good; in practice, it did not work out well because there was an in-built trap. In Vietnam—and this occurs in other places too, such as Thailand—the distribution of population is mostly along traffic arteries, canals, roads and railways. The authorities were able to bring the people along these arteries under their security umbrella, but the areas between the arteries were not covered. After a couple of years of the programme, the Viet Cong were stranded in the middle areas, which raised the question—were the government forces infiltrating them or were they infiltrating the government-held areas?

It became fairly obvious after some time that as the government forces further and further extended themselves it was they who were being penetrated, not by any action from the Viet Cong but by the very neglect with which the

STRATEGIC HAMLETS PROGRAMME— Who was penetrating whom?



-  Main arteries (roads, railways, canals etc)
-  Viet Cong-held areas
-  Strategic hamlets

government forces had stretched themselves out along the arteries and not done anything about lateral protection.

So the South Vietnamese found themselves in a position where they were the penetrated element rather than being the controllers of the countryside; the overthrow of South Vietnam's President Diem just precipitated slightly more quickly a set of events that would have come about in any event because the government side was very vulnerable. One year later, at the end of 1964 and early 1965, South Vietnam was in a very weak condition. The National Reserve had been smashed in a series of battles—10 of the 11 battalions in the National Reserve had been eliminated—and the Army of Vietnam was prostrate, knocked out. But still its prostrate body was lying across the access to Saigon. Saigon was essential because it was the political and demographic centre of the country. The remnants of the Armed Forces of Vietnam (ARVN) were lying across the roads into Saigon, and Hanoi decided they had to be removed.

At this stage the Communists made their first mistake, one from which they have never recovered. They decided that to remove the ARVN it was necessary to double the size of their field forces and to do this they had to recruit much more forcefully and resort to conscription. This was an image-breaking decision on the part of the Communists; prior to this they had never had to conscript. To support conscription, they had to impose severe taxes, whereas previously they had pressed the Vietnamese people for "donations".

These two elements, conscription and taxation, were a severe blow to the Communists' local image. They lost the previous image they had of being somewhat benign "big brothers" and now became "oppressors" The Communists

were now on their own downward slippery slope from which there was no return. They were moving out of what we call Phase II and into Phase III—the big battalion organization. It was now easy to go downwards but almost irreversible to go back into Phase II.

U.S. Intervention

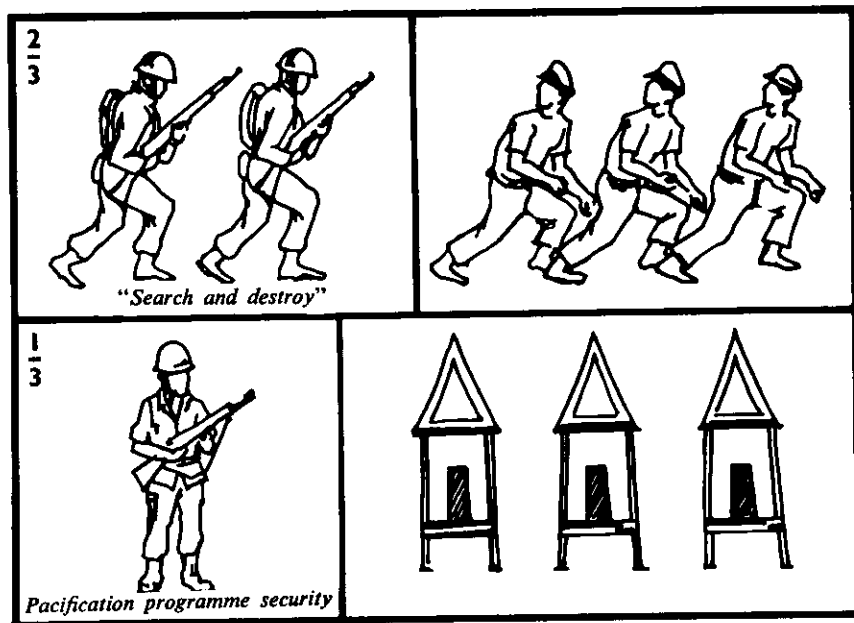
WITH the build-up of the Communist forces, President Johnson decided to introduce American forces; it was a necessary move. There was no way that the South Vietnamese forces at the time could have withstood the onslaught of the Communists, who had opted to move into Phase III because of their assumption that they could get the job over and done with before there was any possibility of American intervention.

However, the Americans got into Vietnam a great deal faster than anybody had any reasonable hope of anticipating. It was one of the great military operations of all time. By getting there so quickly they fouled the prospect of the Viet Cong in their move down from Phase II to Phase III. The Communists thought they could get away with it. They were not unaware of the implications of the crude method of building up their field forces; their idea was—"Let us get it over with and even though we have dealt ourselves a psychological blow we can handle this once we have the government in our hands. We will pacify the people."

They probably would have succeeded; they did very much the same thing in North Vietnam; at the loss of several hundred thousand people that they killed off afterwards, they pacified their own country. They would have done the same thing in South Vietnam. Fortunately the Americans won the race and pushed their field forces into Vietnam to stabilize the situation. Their presence replaced the loss of the Vietnamese Armed Forces National Reserve and that blocked the Communists' path to the big cities.

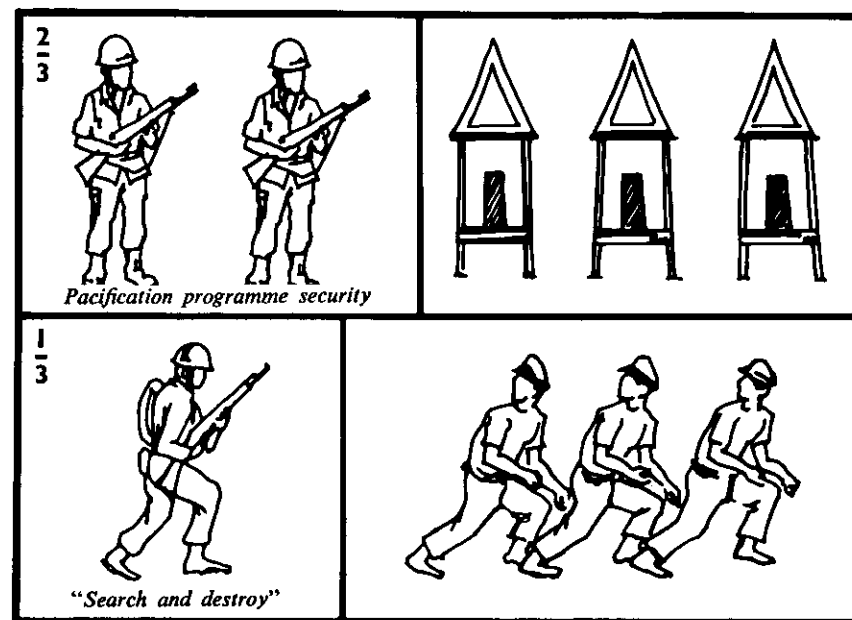
PRE-MARCH 1968 Big Battalion Strategy —

*Necessary for blunting enemy
Phase III "main force operations",
but took resources away from
Pacification Programme.*



AFTER MARCH 1968 Small Unit Actions —

*Expanded strength of Pacification
Programme and a successful
response to the Communists who
were reverting to Phase II.*



With the situation stabilized, the Americans were then faced with their first big decision—"Should we develop the armed elements of Vietnam on the big battalion basis or should we do it on the small unit action basis and go in for "village development"? For various reasons the big battalion approach was selected. We can look back now and see that that it was the wrong choice. Both from the damage it caused to the American image in Vietnam and to the American political stability in the United States, on which fundamentally the whole operation rested. The big battalion operations involved heavy casualties and great expenditure.

Then a little time passed and the allied cause got a break, albeit an accidental one. It came when in March, 1968, President Johnson announced that the American troops ceiling in Vietnam would stay at around 550,000 men. Now there were great wails of discord everywhere and everybody said—"This is the end. We cannot do any more. We have got to have another 200,000 troops." In fact, this was the best thing that could possibly have happened for the Allied cause because it forced a revision of strategy. If forced upon the Allied Commanders something that otherwise they would not have done. With no more "pipeline" fighting troops coming in from the United States, it became essential that there was a South Vietnamese national reserve.

The only way that a reserve could be formed was by taking away the elements that were forming the big battalion battles. Of these combat elements two-thirds were engaged in "search-and-destroy" operations—big unit operations out near the borders—and the remaining one-third was engaged in security operations of the Pacification Programme. The reserve could only be formed by direct subtraction from the two-thirds on the search-and-destroy operations. By doing

that, the Allies were forced to reverse the balance of their strategy and one-third then became the search-and-destroy forces and two-thirds became the security forces. As a result the United States and South Vietnamese forces were forced to go more and more for so-called "small unit actions". So the Allies found themselves inadvertently diverted into a very sound posture.

The operation mounted in 1970 by United States and South Vietnamese forces to remove Communist sanctuaries in Cambodia delivered a crushing blow to Hanoi. There has been some uninformed and naive calculation as to the effect of that operation. Some people have made comments such as—"It is worth to six months to the Allies." Others have mentioned eight months or ten months or more. Forget that. That is irrelevant. It is not a matter of six months, eight months or ten months. The effect of the Cambodian operation is not quantitative. It is absolute. There has been produced by the Cambodian operation a set of circumstances that, in this present context, that is in the next few years, is irreversible from the Communists' point of view. There is no way in the world in which they will ever be able to re-establish the situation and in the degree that they had before the Allied move into Cambodia.

The best that they can do is to establish themselves in the four north-eastern provinces of Cambodia and wait for the reduction of the American forces in Vietnam. As the Americans pull out, the Communists will hope to return to their offensive posture in Vietnam. Meanwhile they are trying to go back along the very difficult route from Phase III to Phase II. But they are coming back up again in the face of public antagonism. The people do not want them now. There was a time when the people were neutral and leaning towards them from fear. Now, the people are still

neutral but leaning away from them from disinterest and disgust. The Communists have lost their credibility. They have been promising and promising for the best part of 20 years now; now they are no longer believed.

The Communists will be waiting in the four Cambodian north-eastern provinces for a long time because, even though the American forces are going out, the Vietnamese forces are increasing in strength. They are increasing in quality rather than quantity. The problem is coming down to meet them because the Communist enemy is eroding. He is getting less both in quantity and quality. There is every reason for the Allies to be confident about the future development of operations in Vietnam.

National Development

THE South Vietnamese are at a stage where they are able to get on with national development. This is essential because if there is no effective and proper pattern of national development they could lose again all that has been gained so painfully over the past few years. National development is the absolute essential of political stability. There must be a good economic basis to attain political satisfaction in the country; once there is political satisfaction in South Vietnam there is no way in which the Communists will be able to re-establish themselves short of force. Of course, that is something for which the Allies must always be on the alert.

Now, I say that in the south of the south (the Delta area, around Saigon and in the coastal strip of central Vietnam), in the areas with the major demographic strength of South Vietnam, the war is over. I do not include the north of South Vietnam or the Central Highlands. Now it is time for a new posture in south Vietnam; it would be physically possible for the country to continue in a new condition in the old mode. This would be wrong. If indeed the climate is different, if the conditions have changed, if the Allies have won strategically, which I say they have, then changes should be made to meet the changed situation in South Vietnam. One major change must involve the police force which should be reorganized to move into the new mode of the early 1970s. The recognition of this need is a critical factor in the future of the Republic of Vietnam. If this point is not understood, the nation will be broken apart, even though the war is over.

The situation of Thailand is related to, but by no means identical, to the situation of Vietnam. The problems of Vietnam are much more difficult because there is an operation going on there. There is an operation going on in Thailand; it is not as physically difficult as the one in Vietnam but is much more complex. It is a wider, a much more varied operation. Thailand's frontiers are wider, and the difficulties are more diverse than the ones faced in Vietnam. The Vietnam conflict was a hard war but essentially a simple one. The situation in Thailand has not reached the stage of war.

It is going to be necessary for the Thais to take a very hard, shrewd look at their priorities. They must look around and work them out. That is easy to say and not too difficult to do. The real difficulty comes once the priorities have been established; once there is machinery existing to handle the priorities. There is a tremendous temptation to make subtractions from the priorities to meet day-to-day immediate problems. Things will happen in this province or that province and there is a danger that calls will be made on the machinery that has been set up to deal with a long-term operation to meet a problem which has been calculated will occur two, three or four years ahead. This temptation must be resisted.

All the time those who make the decisions must be saying to themselves—"Yes, yes, I know that I have today's problem. I know I have to do something about that, but whatever I do about today's problem must not be at the expense of my bigger broader plans for next year's problem". That is the thing to keep in mind. That is true command. That is true generalship.

It is easy to respond on reaction to the day-to-day needs. The real commander is the man who can understand what is going on day by day and do something about it, do enough about it. But he keeps his reserves in hand, keeps his means intact to handle what he knows is going to come on in six months, a year or two years' time.



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