# The Strategic Hamlet Program in Kien Hoa Province, South Vietnam: A Case Study of Counter-Insurgency

by

John B. O'Donnell

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THE STRATEGIC HAMLET PROGRAM IN KIEN HOA PROVINCE, SOUTH VIETNAM:
A CASE STUDY OF COUNTER-INSURGENCY

By

John B. O'Donnell
INTRODUCTION

This paper will consider some aspects of the counter­
insurgency program conducted in the province of Kien Hoa in
the Mekong Delta area of South Vietnam. The writer was the
U.S. Operations Mission (A.I.D.) Provincial Representative
in Kien Hoa from December 1962 to August 1964. This paper
will present first the physical, cultural and historical set­
ting and a brief description of the insurgents, followed by
a short analysis of the origins and aims of the Strategic
Hamlet Program, discussion of the methods used and results
obtained in Kien Hoa Province and then some conclusions and
recommendations which may be drawn from this experience.

Setting

Kien Hoa is one of the 45 provinces of South Vietnam
and is located 50 miles south of Saigon, where the Mekong
River meets the South China Sea. On a map and from the air,
the province looks like a giant green and brown paw--the
elements of the paw composed of three large, long islands
separated by the major channels of the Mekong. The edges
of the islands are dense with coconut groves and swamp palms,
the ends are large salt fields and mud flats covered with
tangled mangrove and swampbrush, the interiors of the islands
are made up of rice paddies criss-crossed by levies and canals.
The total area of the province is 215,520 hectares (832 sq. mi.)
with a population of approximately 550,000.
Although adjacent to the area where Khmer (the ancient Cambodian empire) influence has been greatest in South Vietnam, the people of Kien Hoa are almost entirely ethnic Vietnamese. Because of the relative wealth of the province and the emphasis placed on education, they are better educated than their neighbors to the north and south.

Many of the great heroes of the Vietnamese past either came from or were associated with Ben Tre, which was the name of the province before it was changed to Kien Hoa by President Diem in 1957. Phan Thanh Gian, a leader in the early resistance against the French, circa 1880, was born in Kien Hoa and, after attempting valiantly to deter the French from taking over Cochin China, committed suicide in protest against the French encroachment on Vietnamese sovereignty. Earlier, when Nguyen Anh, later proclaimed Emperor Gia Long, sought refuge in Kien Hoa after being driven from Central Vietnam by the Tay-Son, he enlisted the support of General Truong Tan Buu, a native of Ben Tre, who became a key figure in Gia Long's long, difficult but eventually successful campaign to drive the Tay-Son from Central Vietnam. The farmers and fishermen of Kien Hoa have perpetuated the legends of Phan Thanh Gian and Truong Tan Buu and are proud of being from
the same area which produced these and many other national heroes.

Kien Hoa is an extremely rich province. The coconut groves of Kien Hoa provide over half of the fresh coconut and copra production for the entire country. The 1962 harvest of 196,000 metric tons of unprocessed rice ranked eleventh in the country, with an average yield of 1.8 tons per hectare, which ranked twentieth in the country. The other major income sources in Kien Hoa are: fish, fruit, duck feathers, and tobacco.

Because of the superior education, rich tradition and extreme pride of the people in Kien Hoa which made them natural leaders in other revolutionary struggles, the agricultural wealth of the province which provides money to support the guerrilla effort in Kien Hoa and other provinces as well, plus the difficult terrain at the edges and tips of the islands which provides excellent concealment for training camps, hospitals, supply depots, munitions factories, rest and recreation areas, the Viet Cong have placed the "liberation" of Kien Hoa high on their priority list. In fact, captured documents indicated that the Viet Cong attempted to make their effort in Kien Hoa their model for "liberation" programs throughout the Mekong Delta.

When the Geneva Accords were signed in 1954, Binh Dai, Ba Tri and Thanh Phu at the tips of the three islands of Kien Hoa
were designated regrouping areas for the Viet Minh who wished to go to North Vietnam. According to reports from people who lived in Kien Hoa at the time, many of the Viet Minh who were regrouped in Kien Hoa for transportation to the North did not leave, either deciding of their own free will to remain in the province, or, as with some, receiving orders to stay behind. A token amount of Viet Minh arms was turned in to the International Control Commission and the rest were cached where they could be brought out again if and when the need arose. Many of those who did go north left behind members of their families—wives, children, parents, or brothers and sisters.

Following the exodus to the North, things settled down in Kien Hoa as the ex-Viet Minh went back to their rice fields and coconut groves to await the reunification of the two halves of Vietnam. However, the elections to reunify the country were never held. Some accuse Diem of refusing to hold the elections, others blame the Russians who were worried about the uprisings against the Communist agrarian reform program in the North. The truth probably lies somewhere in between, with both sides unwilling to take the chance of losing the election.

By late 1957, it became increasingly apparent that President Diem
having neutralized or virtually eliminated the threat from the Binh Xuyen, Cao Dai and Hoa Hao, and having consolidated his power in Saigon and the other major population centers, was gradually extending his control to the countryside, employing many of the techniques of propaganda and political action used formerly by the Viet Minh. These developments alarmed the Hanoi regime and the former Viet Minh still living in the South, and it was evidently decided by the North Vietnamese government that political, psychological and military struggle which had brought the Viet Minh success against the French should be resumed. Accordingly, in early 1958, some of those who had gone north in 1954 began to reappear in their native villages in the South. Former Viet Minh who had remained behind in 1954 began to make the long trek north for indoctrination and training. The cadre who had returned from the North established themselves in the villages where government presence was limited or where the government had never completely succeeded in re-establishing its presence following the Viet Minh struggle.

The first step in resuming the struggle was to establish the security of what they designated their "base area." Small cells were set up in the remote villages and intelligence and propaganda operations were begun. A dossier of the misdeeds of local officials and others loyal to the government was compiled
and a rumor campaign was mounted against them. When the proper climate of opposition to supporters of the My-Diem (U.S.-Diem) regime had been created, a campaign was started to win over, neutralize, drive away, or, if necessary, assassinate these officials, land-owners, wealthy merchants, and other "My-Diem puppets."

As the pro-government presence was gradually eliminated, a shadow Viet Cong political apparatus was formed to replace it. As base areas were secured, intelligence agents and then propaganda and political action specialists utilizing the intelligence gathered, began to fan out into adjacent areas. The propaganda themes were simple—social justice, an end to corrupt and cruel government, land to the tiller, down with the Americans' puppet Diem, an independent prosperous Vietnam for the Vietnamese.¹

Young men were taken into the ranks of the National Liberation Army. Men, women and children were urged to contribute money and energy to the efforts of the National Liberation Front. Small raids, carefully planned and executed, were carried out against remote government outposts to capture weapons and ammunition for the National Liberation Army. Roads were mined and ambushes sprung to create an air of fear which would discourage the government troops and officials from visiting the rural areas except with strong military escort. Government attempts at suppression of the insurgency and retaliation against the Viet Cong tactics served only to add
recruits to the growing National Liberation Army.

In addition to receiving reports of assassinations and attacks on outposts, President Diem learned of the deteriorating situation in other ways: farmers were dragging their feet on repayment of Government Agricultural Credit loans, land service cadre were having an increasingly difficult time collecting annual payments for land distributed under the land reform program of 1957, rural cooperatives were failing, landowners were unable to collect rent from tenant farmers and troops were becoming increasingly hesitant to enter areas of the province where the guerrillas were operating.

Alarmed by these reports from Kien Hoa, President Diem in early 1960, appointed Lt. Col. Pham Ngoc Thao province chief. Lt. Col. Thao was a former regimental commander and later chief of counter-intelligence for the Viet Minh forces in Cochin China. Unlike most of his present fellow officers, he had not rallied to the French sponsored Vietnamese government established in 1949 but had continued with the resistance forces until the end of armed hostilities in 1954. Upon arrival in Kien Hoa in 1960, Thao began to enlarge and improve the local military forces. He imported a large number of former Hoa Hao soldiers. The Hoa Hao are a militant religious sect who had set up their own, virtually autonomous, government in the lower Mekong Delta
during the Viet Minh struggle. Following the war, they had been cleverly assimilated into the national political structure and, for all purposes, eliminated as a powerful political and military force.

The Hoa Hao brought into Kien Hoa were assigned specific areas of responsibility by Thao and through a combination of ruthless military tactics and a crude but effective campaign of psychological warfare and terrorism were able to drive the Viet Cong back from the edges of the main towns and villages. When Thao first arrived in Kien Hoa, his provincial headquarters was often fired upon from a small river by Viet Cong forces. After a few months, the firing ceased completely and the road which connected the provincial capital with Saigon was once again safe for traffic. But the strong arm tactics of Thao's Hoa Hao irregulars, although apparently initially effective, began to generate complaints from individuals loyal to the government over and above the constant complaints of Viet Cong sympathizers and became an increasing source of embarrassment for President Diem.

The President decided that Thao might be better used elsewhere and sent him off to Command and General Staff School at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, and appointed in his place a young major, Tran Ngoc Chau, who was serving on the planning
staff of the Presidency. Chau was born and raised in Hue, the former capitol of Annam. He was the son of an important mandarin who was an old friend of President Diem. Chau dropped out of school at the end of World War II and joined the nationalist forces who were preparing their campaign against the returning French. He was sent to Tonkin for training, where he had an opportunity to see and listen to Ho Chi Minh and Vo Nguyen Giap talk of the people's war and people's army. Chau was then assigned to the highlands of Central Vietnam where he rose in the ranks of the Viet Minh.

When the semi-independent Vietnamese government was set up by the French in 1949, he left the Viet Minh and returned to Hue. Subsequently he entered the Vietnamese Military Academy at Dalat and upon graduation was assigned to a Vietnamese battalion of the French Expeditionary Force and fought against the Viet Minh.

After the Indo-China War, Chau continued in the army as a troop commander, inspector of Civil Guard and Self Defense Forces in the area immediately south of Saigon and finally as a member of President Diem's planning staff before being appointed Province Chief of Kien Hoa in May, 1962.

With this introduction we can turn to a discussion of the Strategic Hamlet Program, its origin and aims and the methods used and results obtained in Kien Hoa province.
THE STRATEGIC HAMLET PROGRAM: ORIGINS

The Strategic Hamlet Program of the government of President Ngo Dinh Diem was officially adopted on April 17, 1962, as the vehicle for meeting the growing Viet Cong threat. Many individuals -- Vietnamese, Americans, British and French -- have claimed credit for its development. It is probably most accurate to say that Councilor Ngo Dinh Nhu, brother and closest advisor to the President, was the prime mover in the development and execution of the program. The details of the program were worked out by a small group of Vietnamese officials (many of them former Viet Minh, including young Major Tran Ngoc Chau), assigned to the Presidential planning staff. They included in the final program proposal the best elements of ideas presented from many sources -- the British experience in Malaya with the "new villages," the experience of Vietnamese civilian and military officials who had already started security and political-social-economic programs in various parts of the country, the experience gained in the campaign against the Huks in the Philippines, the American frontier fort, the land development centers and agrovilles used by the Government of Vietnam (GVN) as resettlement centers for refugees from North Vietnam and colonization projects in undeveloped areas of the country, many of the elements of the strategy and tactics used by the Viet Minh in their campaign against the French, the counter-insurgency tactics developed by the French in Indo-China.
and Algeria and many other experiences and counter-insurgency theories.

Aims

The aim of the Strategic Hamlet Program, as stated by President Diem, was to create a "state of mind;" the commitment of the peasants to the support of their government and resistance to the Viet Cong. It is essential that one remembers that the South Vietnamese Government and the Viet Cong were, in fact, competing in all fields for the loyalty and the support of the majority of the people; both believing that whichever side gained this loyalty and support would be the eventual winner in the complex struggle. The Viet Cong were attempting to force the Government to withdraw from the rural areas to the large towns and cities where political subversion, economic strangulation and increasing military pressure would result in a total collapse. This could be done only with the support of the rural population who provide the manpower and money for the effort.

The Government was attempting to reverse the process by forcing the Viet Cong back to their base areas where they could be destroyed. Once again, the support of the rural population was essential. The Viet Cong believed that time was on their side; the GVN felt that their position of responsibility dictated a major accelerated effort.
Insert to page 12 (following from the last line "...could be attained"
(for more details on the aims of the Strategic Hamlet Program, see Bohannon 1963).
To bring about commitments to the government, the peasant had to be convinced that he should, and could successfully oppose the Viet Cong. Translated into more explicit terms, the Strategic Hamlet program was intended to provide the average peasant and his family with the following things:

(a) a reasonable degree of safety;
(b) a reasonable livelihood;
(c) a reasonable amount of elementary justice;
(d) a reasonable chance for his children;
(e) a reasonable degree of status in his community;
(f) a reasonable degree of opportunity.

In addition to the major task outlined above, a second task and overall objective were written into the program. The second task was to "teach through experience, the practices and processes, the requirements and rewards, of self-government." When both tasks had been accomplished, the final objective of "a stable, prosperous, self-governing nation, offering adequate and equal opportunity and protection, under law, to all its loyal citizens, could be attained."
Methods Used

The tasks and objective, as stated, were (and are) basically sound and admirable goals for any government. The problem was to carry these goals from the point of talking about them to developing and executing programs which would bring about the desired results. As a result of the trips of Vice-President Lyndon Johnson and General Maxwell Taylor to Vietnam in 1961, the United States decided to increase its support to the Government of Vietnam in its struggle against the Viet Cong insurgents. More U.S. military advisors were sent to Vietnam and the military assistance program was increased.

Realizing that the political-economic-social-psychological aspects of the struggle were equally or more important than the military aspects, the Agency for International Development began to search for ways to intensify and accelerate non-military support. Accordingly, in early 1962, a special task force was set up in the U.S. Operations Mission (USOM)/Saigon to refocus ongoing aid programs and coordinate activities which contributed to the Strategic Hamlet National Plan with the Vietnamese Government and U.S. military. In addition, a two-man team was sent to Saigon in May 1962 to survey the situation and prepare recommendations for increased A.I.D. support. Rufus Phillips, the leader of the team, had been an advisor to the Vietnamese Army units involved in the re-establishment of GVN control
in the Camau Peninsula and Interzone V (Binh Dinh and Quang Ngai Provinces in Central Vietnam) following the end of hostilities in 1954. He had later served as advisor to the Royal Lao Government during the establishment of the Action Cívico program in that country. Bert Fraleigh, the other member of the team, had been with A.I.D. and its predecessor agencies since 1947, primarily in Mainland China, Taiwan and Laos, most recently serving as Operations Officer with USOM/Taiwan.

Phillips and Fraleigh, after several weeks of travel and discussion with GVN and U.S. officials in Vietnam, recommended that a special office for Rural Affairs (Counter-Insurgency) be established within the A.I.D. mission This office would serve as the action unit for administering a decentralized program to support the GVN Strategic Hamlet Plan. The plan contemplated the assignment of a USOM representative to each of the provinces of Vietnam who would be responsible for administering a greatly increased non-military assistance program.

It was estimated that U.S. $10,000,000 in local currency would be required to get the program moving. This money would be used to help defray the costs incurred by rural families who would be required to move from the insecure areas into strategic hamlets, to support the recruiting, training and deployment of government cadre who would work in the countryside, to support the training of local militia and hamlet officials, to cover a
portion of the costs of self-help projects selected by hamlet residents, to support, as needed, psychological warfare and other complementary activities. It was also recommended that "Food for Peace" (Public Law 480, Title II) commodities and U.S. excess property items which would contribute to the counter-insurgency effort be imported.

AID/Washington accepted the recommendations, and Rufus Phillips was selected to head the Office of Rural Affairs and Bert Fraleigh was transferred from Taiwan to be his deputy. The special purchase of U.S. $10,000,000 of local currency was authorized and procurement of PL 480 and excess property requirements was started. Recruitment of provincial representatives was initiated by AID/Washington.

Phillips and Fraleigh started work with the GVN on developing more specific administrative procedures. As a first step, instructions were sent from Saigon to the province chiefs requesting the preparation of comprehensive provincial rehabilitation (strategic hamlet establishment) plans and detailed estimates of the funds, materials and personnel required to carry out the plans.

When this writer arrived in Vietnam in October, 1962, a few provincial rehabilitation plans had already been received in Saigon, and more were arriving daily. These plans were reviewed briefly by the Office of the Executive Secretary of
the Interministerial Council, the Office of Rural Affairs of the U.S. Operations Mission and the Strategic Hamlets Division of the U.S. Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG). A joint U.S./GVN team composed of the directors of these three organizations then made a field trip to the province concerned to work out any problems and prepare a budget for USOM financial and material support, and a calculation of M.A.P. (Military Assistance Program) materials required which would be supplied through MAAG. These two documents were then presented to the U.S. Committee on Provincial Rehabilitation, and the GVN Interministerial Committee for Strategic Hamlets, where they were discussed and given official approval. The budgets were then cleared by the various GVN and U.S. officials concerned, and a check for a portion of the funds allocated (usually three months operating costs) was drawn on the GVN treasury and delivered to the Province Chief by a representative from the Office of Rural Affairs.

The scope and depth of the provincial rehabilitation plans varied according to the imagination of the province chief concerned. In the case of Kien Hoa province, Lt. Col. Chau approached the preparation of his plan in a sensible way. Upon his arrival in Kien Hoa in May 1962, Chau immediately began an intensive study of the situation in the province. He visited every district and most of the available villages, talking to
government officials, para-military commanders and their troops, businessmen, money-lenders, farmers, bus-drivers, captured Viet Cong, women and children.

He read back into the history of Kien Hoa and its heroes, studied the flow of products and money between the towns and the countryside, reviewed the past production figures for copra, rice, tobacco and fish, discussed the land reform program with land-owners and tenant farmers, discussed the educational system with teachers and students, and parents, analyzed the reports of enemy activities, both military and the complex political-psychological-economic combination.

During the six months from May to October, Chau studied the province from every angle. At the same time, he strengthened his intelligence system to gather more information and also accomplished the very important task of instilling new hope and enthusiasm in everyone he contacted. In early November, Chau presented his provincial rehabilitation plan to a joint GVN/U.S. committee in Saigon.

This writer was present at this meeting and was impressed by Chau's imagination and ability. His plan was well thought out, daring in some respects and included details which conveyed his deep understanding of the strategy and tactics of the enemy and the measures that would have to be undertaken to cope with them. Chau's request for money, materials and
personnel was considered excessive by some members of the committee so the whole group made a trip to Kien Hoa to discuss the matter further. They came away impressed by what he had already been able to do with the limited means at his disposal and subsequently authorized a major portion of his request.

The USOM support budget was prepared and approved and a USOM provincial representative (the writer,) was appointed to assist and advise Chau in the implementation of his plan.

Under the terms of the piastre release agreement, a committee was established at the provincial level composed of the Chief of Province as Chairman, and the USOM Provincial Representative and the U.S. MAAG Sector Advisor as members. The latter officer was involved because each province was also considered a military sector, with the Province Chief as commander of local military forces and as civil administrator. All expenditures of Provincial Rehabilitation funds had to be discussed and approved by all three members of the Provincial Rehabilitation Committee. All questions were supposed to be resolved by the Provincial Committee with minimum reliance on the Vietnamese or American officials in Saigon.

The decentralization of responsibility and authority was one of the fundamental tenets of the Strategic Hamlet Program and a key element in its early success. The flexibility thus
provided allowed the program to move ahead rapidly and to adjust fairly well to the constantly changing situation. The degree of independence and responsibility which the provincial committee assumed varied according to the confidence and aggressiveness of the Province Chief. Decentralization to this extent was a radical departure from past practice and many Vietnamese at both provincial and central government level found it difficult to adjust and did not use to the full advantage the responsibility and authority entrusted to them.

The struggle was at the grass roots level and it was **sine qua non** of the Strategic Hamlet Program that the administration of the means to carry out the program be placed at the lowest practicable level. The risks inherent in decentralization of fiscal responsibility in a culture where the people often know and look the other way in cases of graft and corruption were to some extent compensated for by the presence of foreign observers in the person of the American members of the committee. There were cases of improper usage of funds which were uncovered by the American advisors and brought to the attention of the Province Chief, and, in the case of Kien Hoa, many others which were uncovered by the Province Chief and passed on to the Americans. There were certainly cases of improper uses of funds which were not caught. It is difficult to generalize on, or even estimate, the degree of misuse of funds; but it is fair
to state that this problem was of major concern to the American representatives in the field who attempted to assure proper use of funds and fiscal responsibility to the best of their ability.

It should be noted at this point that there were no known precedents for many aspects of the Strategic Hamlet Program and new procedures of all sorts had to be established on an ad hoc basis. Fortunately, some of the personnel in the Office of Rural Affairs had had previous experience in Asia and assisted in the development of logistical and accounting procedures which were later combined and generalized for the whole country.

With the strategic hamlet support funds deposited in the provincial treasury and the military and civilian support items beginning to arrive in the province, the program began to move forward. The first step taken by the Province Chief was to initiate recruitment of cadre who would be responsible for guiding the rural population in the establishment of strategic hamlets.

Chau held a meeting of his district chiefs and instructed them to start recruiting candidates for the hamlet constructic cadre positions. There were eight districts in Kien Hoa at that time; a ninth was created in early 1963. A quota was
established for each district depending on the number and phasing of hamlet construction. While the district chiefs were recruiting men, the Chief of Province reorganized his provincial administration to deal better with the accelerated program.

The Special Assistant to the Province Chief for hamlet establishment (who ranked as a Deputy Province Chief along with the Deputy for Military Affairs and the Deputy for Administration,) was a young major named Cao Minh Quan who was born and raised in Kien Hoa and knew the province well. He was charged with the responsibility for setting up sites for training and developing programs of instruction for the hamlet construction cadre, village and hamlet officials and the hamlet militia. The Central Government had sent out sketchy instructions on training which were improved by the provincial staff; Chau contributed many ideas which were expanded by Quan.

Within a few weeks the construction and equipping of training sites was well underway and the recruits for the hamlet construction cadre had arrived in the provincial capital. The province chief dropped his other duties for two days and personally interviewed all the candidates. He then made the first of many decisions which were to add greatly to the effectiveness of his program but which eventually ran head-on into the opposition of the Saigon bureaucracy. Realizing that the
success or failure of the program depended to a very great extent on the attitude or ability of the hamlet construction cadre, who would have direct contact with the villagers the government was trying so hard to influence, Chau decided that 900 piastres (U.S. $12.37) per month was not sufficient compensation for the work that he expected from these young men and women. He suggested that the provincial committee agree to the reduction of the number of cadre used in the program, and to use the surplus funds thus created to pay those selected a higher salary. After consultation with the Assistant Director for Rural Affairs, this move was approved by the provincial committee. This is a good example of the flexibility built into the general program which was an essential ingredient of its early success.

The selected cadre then underwent an intensive training program conducted by the chief of the province, his special assistant for hamlet establishments, and various other provincial officials. The cadre were intelligent, and appeared sincere in their desire to save their country. Chau's close personal attention to the recruitment and training was in good part responsible for their success in the field. Upon graduation from their training program, the cadre were organized into eleven man teams. The team leaders were generally young men from the Provincial Office of the Ministry of Civic Action. This had been established about 1957 as the agency responsible for
extending and strengthening government control in the country­side. The Civic Action cadre were usually capable individuals who had been fairly well trained in political/propaganda ac­tivities. Many of them had already had two or three years ex­perience in Kien Hoa, working with the rural population. Most of the other team members had never worked for the government before.

The eleven man teams were broken down three sections which were charged with different responsibilities. Three members of the team were responsible for gathering detailed information on all aspects of hamlet life, e.g., breakdown by population, by sex and age group, agricultural and livestock production, names and attitudes of families with members in the Viet Cong (we shall return to this later); agricultural credit loans granted, and repayment experience, existence and condition of schools, dispensaries, temples, churches, etc. These data were to prove invaluable for planning realistic social and economic improvement programs in the individual hamlets.

Three members of the team were responsible for organizing the hamlet residents into work groups and directing the con­struction of the hamlet defenses. The hamlet defenses usually consisted of a wide moat and a mud wall topped by a barbed wire fence which followed the perimeter of the population grouping.
This type of defense works was better suited to conditions found in the highland areas of Central Vietnam where the people tend to live in closely grouped clusters. In Kien Hoa, and for that matter in most of the Mekong Delta area, the people live in loose population groupings strung out along a road, canal or river. The hamlet perimeters were in many cases four to five kilometers long, which was too long to be effectively guarded by the two squads of militia authorized for each hamlet. The remaining four members of the team were responsible for explaining the philosophy and objectives of the strategic hamlet programs, organizing the hamlet residents into social and economic action groups according to sex and age, developing a hamlet charter, and arranging for the election of hamlet officials by secret ballot. These activities of the political/propaganda component of the cadre team were the most important, and, unfortunately, the least clearly defined and understood elements of the entire strategic hamlet process. In areas where the hamlet construction cadre understood these elements and their importance and also possessed the personality traits which enabled them to convince the villagers of their integrity and sincerity and of the genuine concern of the government for their security and welfare, the people responded and started taking the first steps toward committing themselves to the government. It was at this crucial point that the importance of careful selection, thorough
training, adequate and continuing guidance, and constant attention to problems which affected the morale of the cadre, became clearly evident. When the critical elements of understanding the program and establishing rapport were missing, the hamlet establishment phase often became a period of unpleasant, meaningless forced labor for the villagers. Although all of the physical steps might have been carried out, the hamlet was really nothing more than the population grouping now surrounded by a worthless mud wall, with a group of men who had been trained in military tactics and provided weapons, but had no desire to use them, a hamlet charter which was torn up by the Viet Cong agents who returned to the hamlet once the government cadre had left, and with "elected officials" who either fled the hamlet or agreed to cooperate with the Viet Cong.

A hamlet establishment team would generally stay in a hamlet from three to eight weeks, depending on the attitude of the population, degree of Viet Cong subversion, and other factors. When all the basic steps had been accomplished, to the satisfaction of the cadre, the village officials and district chief, a ceremony was held, usually presided over by the province chief or one of his deputies, to "inaugurate" the new "strategic" hamlet. The steps outlined above were the basic procedures for implementing the Strategic Hamlet Program. There were many other elements that will be discussed later in this paper.
At this point, however, two important points should be made:

(1) The Strategic Hamlet Program was not intended to be a rigid program. As more experience was developed and the situation changed, old programs were refined or discarded and new programs were initiated. The overall objective and the two tasks outlined earlier plus the basic procedural format remained the same, but the tactics used within this framework varied from area to area and from week to week. There are 45 provinces in South Vietnam and it has often been said that there are 45 different wars going on. The Strategic Hamlet Program in each province, although applying the same basic procedural format, developed its individual character. This has been cited by some authorities as one of the basic weaknesses of the program. In the opinion of this writer, it was the most realistic, if not the only, way to proceed. There were no standard precedents for the program and the tactics developed locally were often incorporated in the national plan as they were proven successful. There were many ways to bring about the commitment of the rural people. The tactics developed depended to a great extent upon the attitude, experience, ability and initiative of the local leaders.

(2) The intangibles involved in changing a person's mind, which was the primary aim of the Strategic Hamlet Program, were
often side-tracked or lost in the rush to get things done. Many officials, both Vietnamese and American, fell victim to a hypnotic pre-occupation, with identifiable physical accomplishments, numbers of hamlets completed, numbers of "elections" held, numbers of militia "trained" and on and on. The urgency to move forward was great, the pressure from the enemy was always present and very often the fundamental goal of the program was lost in numbers and the mechanics of every-day activities. It was extremely important to pause at frequent intervals to rethink the reasons for building hamlet defenses, the reasons for holding elections, the reasons for building schools and dispensaries, etc. Unfortunately, this was not done often enough, and the Strategic Hamlet Program, in many areas, although apparently successfully completed, had not resulted in the commitment of people to the side of the government. This is not to say that physical accomplishments, speed and urgency are not vital to the success of the program. They are all essential, but can become virtually meaningless, at times counter-productive, unless they are undertaken with the understanding continually rethought and reinforced, that the fundamental goal is the attainment of an intangible--the creation of a state of mind; the commitment of men to a cause.

The conflict between physical and tangible accomplishments
and between quantity and quality, was the source of much dis-
cussion and friction. In Kien Hoa, Lt. Col. Chau had worked out an ambitious time table for hamlet completion. As the cadre teams moved into areas which had been subjected to a long period of Viet Cong subversion and indoctrination, they found their task increasingly difficult. Accordingly, Chau modified his time table and advised the cadre teams to take more time in these hamlets. The slow-down of the program in Kien Hoa began to bring criticism from higher headquarters. Chau stood firm and refused to be pushed into a race with other provinces to see which one could report more numerical progress each month. During the same period, this writer was also serving as USOM Provincial Representative in Long An Province where the Province Chief was under even greater pressure to accelerate establishment of strategic hamlets. The Province Chief, Major Nguyen Viet Thanh was a dedicated individual and responded to the pressure from Saigon by working day and night and urging his provincial and district staffs to move ahead faster. Standards were not observed as the cadre teams moved rapidly from hamlet to hamlet. Masses of people were relocated resulting in serious problems for the provincial government, and it soon became apparent that the program had been extended far beyond the capabilities of the province. The Viet Cong, who had been carefully plotting their response to the Strategic Hamlet
Program, took advantage of this overextension and began an intensive military and psychological campaign against the government "controlled" zones.

Included here is the General Narrative on progress from the Long An Provincial Representative's Report for June, July '63:

The Provincial Rehabilitation program in Long An Province suffered some severe setbacks during the past two months. Viet Cong activity has picked up considerably --concentrating on attacking strategic hamlets, tearing down walls and fences, kidnaping young men, assassinating hamlet officials and in general destroying the morale and will to resist of the rural population. The hamlet militia have not performed well; the Viet Cong have entered completed strategic hamlets with trained and armed militia squads and have encountered no resistance. Why aren't the hamlet militia standing up to the Viet Cong? There appear to be a number of reasons--1) The militia do not seem to have confidence in their ability to resist the VC--rather than test their ability they are avoiding the enemy. 2) In many hamlets the militia do patrol the defensive perimeter, lay ambushes and stand guard--but only until 2300 or 2400 at which time they all go to sleep, enabling the VC to penetrate with ease during the...
early morning hours. The situation may be corrected by the recruitment and training of additional militia who can then share the defensive assignments, allowing a rest period between patrols, guard duty, etc. (This problem has been discussed with the new province chief, Major Xinh, who plans to set up additional militia training centers which will double the present provincial training capacity.) 3) Long An Province is suffering from a critical shortage of troops—the limited number of troops are committed in great part to static defense (district towns, bridges, posts and security for hamlets under construction. Offensive operations against VC safe areas have been curtailed thus allowing the enemy a breathing spell to regroup and then strike at known government weak points. Because of the shortage of troops, few are available for reaction against VC attacks at night. The militia have come to realize that they will have to stand or fall alone, which has done nothing to improve their morale. The assignment of additional troops to Long An (at least one battalion) would do a great deal to improve the military situation and laterally the morale of the militia.

Another important factor in the present situation in Long An Province is the accelerated rate at which the
establishment of strategic hamlets is being carried out. It appears that the massive relocation effort in March and April and May and the surge in hamlet construction during this period have overextended the provincial capabilities. There is a great need for consolidation activities in hamlets reported as completed. It has been strongly recommended to the new province chief that he recruit and train high calibre cadre to operate in small teams in completed hamlets to 1) examine hamlet defenses and defense plans; recommend improvements in current operating procedures 2) examine hamlet development prospects and advise hamlet residents on self-help projects, NACO loans, collective development projects, etc., 3) serve as personal representatives of the province chief to study the morale of hamlet residents and their attitudes toward the local and provincial administration -- to report directly to the province chief on any cases of corruption or misconduct on the part of Government officials, to advise hamlet committee members on improvement of hamlet administration, etc. The province chief agreed with the need for this type of activity and is presently drawing up a plan for recruiting, training and deployment of such teams.
Early in July Major Nguyen Viet Thanh, province chief, was reassigned to Can Tho as IV Corps, G-3. Major Nguyen Ngoc Xinh, former district chief to Sadec District in Vinh Long province was named as his replacement. Major Xinh does not possess the military abilities of Major Thanh, but is much more civic action oriented. He is very concerned with the people and intends to produce programs which aim directly at winning their loyalty.

Essentially, the same sequence of events was repeated through most of the Delta resulting in the virtual collapse of many of the supposedly "completed" strategic hamlets during the summer and fall of 1963. Chau's approach was to be proven valid in later months when the Strategic Hamlet Program was disintegrating throughout the Delta but the hamlets of Kien Hoa continued to resist bravely in the face of greatly increased Viet Cong military and psychological pressure.

Before moving on to some of the specific complementary programs developed and employed in Kien Hoa, we should take a moment to analyze what made Lt. Col. Chau an effective counter-insurgent. First, he thoroughly understood and believed in the tasks and objective of the Strategic Hamlet Program. Second, he had the ability to translate his understanding of the strategy and tactics of the enemy and his ideas on how to meet them into action
programs which could be carried out by others. Third, he possessed the initiative and self-confidence to use to full advantage the authority and flexibility allowed him under the decentralized concept of operations. Fourth, he had the courage and perseverance to move ahead despite the Viet Cong resistance and pressure and disagreements with the officials of his own government. Fifth, he had the administrative ability and insight to direct the complicated military-political-economic-social-psychological campaign against a ruthless, well-trained enemy. This paper is not intended to be an exposition of the virtues of Lt. Col. Chau. However, any analysis of the program in Kien Hoa must take into consideration his unusual ability and his contribution to whatever success was achieved.

The complementary programs were many and varied. Because of time and security limitations, only a few of them will be discussed in detail. In meetings, Lt. Col. Chau would often say that his approach was very simple, composed of two basic elements: first, public relations; second, economic development.

In the "public relations" field, one program developed by Lt. Col. Chau was to prove extremely valuable in a number of ways. This was his version of a combined complaints and actions-intelligence system. To carry out the program, the province chief instructed each hamlet deputy chief for security to set up an
interview schedule which would include all members of all families of the village over a period of time. The interview, once the necessary rapport was established, would consist of three basic questions: (1) Do you have any complaints against anyone who works for the government, or for that matter, has anyone been giving you a bad time? (2) You know, the Strategic Hamlet Program is really intended to make things better for all of us—what do you think the government should do to make our lives better? (3) The Viet Cong don't bother us too much anymore—have you heard what they're up to? (What about Buu's brother who is with the Viet Cong—has Buu heard from him lately? How are things going for him? Do you think he might be interested in coming back to our hamlet and forget about carrying a rifle in the swamp? Now that the old village chief who used to give him such a hard time has been put in jail by the provincial officials, he really doesn't have much reason to stay away. Also, isn't he still pretty interested in Thanh's sister?)

Reports of these interviews were then sent to the provincial Complaints Bureau where they were condensed and passed on to the province chief daily. The people who were interviewed were also supposed to be informed that they could communicate directly with the province chief if they felt that the interview form might be too public a means to express their grievances.
Lt. Col. Chau read these reports faithfully every day, taking action as required. If there was a report of corruption on the part of a village official Self-Defense Corps (S.D.C.) Commander, he would order the next highest commander to make an investigation and report back to him with full details. If the charge was substantiated, appropriate disciplinary action was taken. Lt. Col. Chau used members of his staff to make discreet investigations when he thought that the superiors of the accused might cover up for him.

The information on the Viet Cong activity, if tactical, was passed on to the district chief for follow-up. General information of strategic value such as Viet Cong tax collection rate, current Viet Cong propaganda, potential defectors, was passed on to his Special Coordinator for Intelligence-Psychological-War activities for inclusion in background documents or direct propaganda exploitation.

The information on the things the people thought the government should be doing in their hamlet, or elsewhere, were used as the basis for preparing meaningful action programs for economic and social development. The interview system was a continuing one. As the program developed, Lt. Col. Chau noticed that some of the hamlet deputies were not sufficiently educated to do a decent job with the interviews and besides it was creating
too much additional work for them. So he recruited several bright young people, trained them in the procedures and sent them to village headquarters to do the same thing. It was much easier for them because they were able to read and write with facility and had no direct involvement with the grievances of the people. This was not a covert operation and the people were encouraged to express themselves freely. The information gained from this activity contributed immeasurably to whatever success was achieved in the province.

It should be noted at this point that one decision that had been made during the formative stages of the Strategic Hamlet Program enabled the provincial committee to engage in activities which would otherwise have been impossible. When the budget categories were established for Strategic Hamlet Program support funds, it was realized that there would be many unforeseen expenses. Accordingly, 10 percent of the total provincial support budget was placed in a "miscellaneous" fund which could be used for projects not otherwise funded that were judged necessary by the provincial support committee. The Kien Hoa provincial committee made good use of the miscellaneous fund provided for many programs—probably the most significant among these were what Lt. Col. Chau called his "public relations" programs.
In addition to providing limited support for the complaints and actions bureau, the provincial committee also authorized the publication of a bi-monthly newspaper to acquaint the people of the province with the things the government was doing to improve the conditions in the province and also to report on the "actions" taken by the Viet Cong. Almost all of the news was local and many pictures were included. The Viet Cong had been publishing a newspaper in the province for several years, distorting facts and pushing their own propaganda line. The government provincial provided a much needed and effective device for getting the government story to the rural population. The provincial committee also authorized the formation and equipping of a provincial theatrical team composed of about 30 young men and women. The group was a great success judging from the size and the response of the crowds they drew in villages throughout the province.

The GVN propaganda capabilities which had previously been judged adequate were, in fact, woefully inadequate when observed at a provincial level. Suggestions for improvements and lists of requirements began to come in from the provinces and the GVN and U.S. staffs in Saigon began to respond. U.S. Information Service (USIS) jumped into the gap on many occasions, and USOM Communications Media Division started procurement of transistor
radios, additional simple printing equipment (to augment the existing village newspaper kits), loudspeaker equipment and other necessary hardware.

Lt. Col. Chau was always looking for ways to improve his information programs, and so, when in early 1964, plans were worked out for importing several small (500 watt) radio transmitters for use in selected provinces, he became quite enthusiastic, remarking at one point that such a radio transmitter would be as valuable to the provincial rehabilitation program as one division of troops.

The Provincial Committee decided to embark on a joint campaign to get a radio station for Kiem Hoa. Requests were prepared and submitted through Vietnamese government channels. Every visitor to Kien Hoa was asked to help get a radio transmitter. When provincial officials or U.S. provincial personnel went to Saigon, they repeated the request. The joint effort paid off and the first of the new transmitters was installed in Kien Hoa in July 1964. This episode is included to illustrate another advantage of the presence of Americans in the decentralized system. The request for the transmitter and many other provincial requests were given added emphasis by submission of an identical request through U.S. channels. American follow-up at all levels, up to and including direct conversation with President Diem and his successors, broke many bottlenecks and
was one of the most important factors contributing to the effectiveness of the decentralized system.

In these and other propaganda programs, (e.g. leaflets, posters, and direct personal contact with families with members in the Viet Cong to try to convince them that their sons or brothers or nephews should return to the government cause [see activities of cadre team, above], helicopter or aircraft mounted loudspeaker broadcasts, etc.,) Lt.Col. Chau always emphasized the importance of basing the all-important local propaganda themes on local intelligence. In many cases the hardware for disseminating the message was available, but the individuals charged with the responsibility for preparing the message did not understand what they were doing, and were more often than not poor writers. To coordinate these two important fields better, a special position was created on the provincial staff for a director of intelligence and psychological warfare activities.

Besides the "public relations" element of his program there were the very important "economic development" aspects which provided the basis for and follow through on the public relations programs. There were far too many programs to go into them in any detail. Among them were the self-help program which was supported by release agreement funds, Food for Peace, (P.L. 480 Title II) supplies, excess property, and imported commodities
such as cement, sheet roofing, reinforcing rods. In addition, programs were undertaken to improve the rural health program. For example, many of the village and hamlet health workers who had been trained in previous years had not been paid for quite some time. This problem was eventually solved through the efforts of the Provincial Committee and the workers were brought in for back pay, training sessions and pep talks.

In education, a hamlet school construction program was undertaken in 1963 with funds from the Asia Foundation and cement and roofing from rural affairs stocks. When this program was underway, a detailed survey of existing schools in the province was made by the I.V.S., International Voluntary Service (a fore­runner of the Peace Corps) volunteer assigned to the province, which served as the basis for a large-scale school improvement and construction program in 1964. The existing provincial vocational school was moved to a larger building and additional tools were supplied from USOM/Rural Affairs excess property stocks. When this writer left the province, USOM/Education had shipped the steel frame for a huge new vocational school to be built on the outskirts of the provincial capitol.

In agriculture, improved rice seed was distributed to about 15,000 farmers in 140 hamlets. The water problem, which was severe during the dry season, gave rise to a program for digging
shallow concrete-lined wells and building concrete block cisterns for catching rain water. (For a description of these and other projects, see USOM Activities Plan, Kien Hoa Province.)

The USOM Provincial Representative served very often as the catalyst for starting a new program, improving an existing program or reviving a defunct program. The technical divisions of USOM provided invaluable guidance and assistance in these efforts.

When the Office of Rural Affairs was created, the technical divisions of USOM were not sure what role the new office would assume or what working relationships would be. As a result, there was some friction between Rural Affairs and technical division personnel at the beginning of the program. When it became apparent that the Provincial Representative could assist the technical divisions of USOM in spreading their programs throughout the country, something they had wanted to do years before but had been unable to do because of time and distance limitations, they pitched in and gave generously of their time and specialized talents to help the generalist at the provincial level.

These, then, were the basic elements of the Strategic Hamlet program which had been designed to achieve an intangible goal.
Did the program achieve the hoped-for results? Had the state of mind been created? Had the people committed themselves to the government because they felt they should and could successfully resist the Viet Cong?

RESULTS OBTAINED

By mid-summer 1963, there were many indications that this "state of mind" was gradually being achieved in Kien Hoa. Included here is the "General Narrative On Progress" from the Provincial Representative for the months of June and July 1963:

The Provincial Rehabilitation Program in Kien Hoa has reached a point during the past two months where encouraging indications of the progress of the program are reported daily. Hamlet militia and S.D.C. are working together to fight off Viet Cong attacks on strategic hamlets, increased intelligence from hamlet residents and defectors from the Viet Cong have resulted in inflicting damage against the Viet Cong, information on Viet Cong units have allowed provincial authorities to track and locate these units and launch successful operations against their bases, hamlet citizens are responding to ever-increasing security by building new homes, schools, hamlet offices, dispensaries, etc.
I have been able to make several field trips through the province and have been impressed by the progress which I have seen. Damaged roads are being repaired and new roads are being built; areas which were inaccessible except by helicopter six months ago can now be reached by jeep with relatively light escort.

In many hamlets, hamlet offices, information halls, dispensaries and schools have been built or are under construction. All of this construction has been accomplished by the hamlet citizens themselves through voluntary contributions and donated labor, with very little, if any, assistance from the government. (I am sure that the proddings of the village and district officials have played a major role in this burst of self-help: nonetheless, it is impressive to observe.)

The hamlet residents appear to be optomistic and anxious to improve their communities. Existing markets are busy and well-stocked; new market places are being built.

The Viet Cong still control or dominate large areas of the province, and the threat of Viet Cong attack is still ever-present, yet it appears that the Strategic Hamlet residents are gaining confidence in their ability
to resist the V.C. The effective use of artillery and mortars at night in support of militia to supplement the S.D.C. and Civil Guard (S.G.) troops in the area, provincial operations against Viet Cong safe areas—all of these factors are contributing to a growing willingness of the people to commit themselves to the Government and against the Viet Cong.

**Relocation:** All districts are relocating families as Strategic Hamlets are constructed. The relocation appears to be well-planned and executed. Food and money are provided to families when they are moved to their home sites.

**Hamlet Militia:** So far, the performance of the hamlet militia has been impressive. To date, 4541 militia have been trained. This is more than the number (20 per hamlet according to Provincial Release Agreement) authorized per hamlet. Col. Chau pursued a policy of training three men for each weapon and in some hamlets there are 30 or 40 trained militia with 10 or 15 weapons.

This policy has worked well—-with more militia to share the responsibility of hamlet defense, there is less pressure on individual militia, who have an opportunity
to rest between assignments. Also, the increased number of militia gives the hamlet residents a sense of security in numbers, a confidence in their ability to repel attack, and a willingness to stand up to attacking Viet Cong forces.

One hamlet I visited had thirty trained militia and ten weapons. When questioned on the value and effectiveness of the militia, the village chief responded, "We have one platoon now to fight against the Viet Cong--we would like one company." This same hamlet had been attacked one hour earlier by a V.C. group which had been driven off by the hamlet militia. In other hamlets, the hamlet militia are going out on night patrols and ambushes with the S.D.C. The large number of trained militia in this hamlet allows this type of activity which has proven beneficial to both the militia and the S.D.C.

Self-Help Projects: Self-help projects have been slow in getting underway. This is due in part to the fact that Col. Chau revised the orientation of the program in Kien Hoa and had to get the word to the people. Special five-day training courses were held in April and May to acquaint the hamlet chiefs with the new self-help concept, and applications are now beginning to flow in. Six projects have been approved and money presented to the hamlets on 31 July.
Forty applications are presently under study. Examples of proposed projects: 1) Hamlet purchases piglets which are distributed to individual farmers for raising - when pig is sold after one year, farmer keeps 60% of profit and hamlet receives 40%; 2) Hamlet uses 20,000 piastres provided by government plus 20,000 collected from hamlet residents to purchase copra from local residents, then arranges for transportation to market in province capitol and keeps profit for improvement of hamlet facilities.

Health Programs: Province has difficulty in retaining trained health workers. Although some 500 have been trained only 82 are working full time. Often these health workers are drafted by ARVN or recruited by CG or SDC. In other cases they receive no pay so are forced to find work which will provide them a livelihood. This problem is presently being studied by the province medicine chief and USOM representative to arrive at some practical solution.

Education Programs: Two buildings at Sun Dong Training Center have been renovated to provide two workshops for provincial vocational school. Work benches have been built
and efforts are currently underway to obtain a generator, machine tools and more hand tools. The vocational school will concentrate on wood-working and forging and welding classes for the present. Dr. High, USOM Education, has assured us that Kien Hoa will be included in the 1964 Action Plan for Rural Trade Schools at which time the present work shops will be converted to dormitories for students from outlying districts. I intend to contact Vaughan Stapleton of IVS to find out whether we might be able to borrow an IVS vocational school advisor for two weeks or a month to help us finalize plans for the school.

Information Programs: Kien Hoa Today newspaper discontinued after issue 12 (June 15)—Province plans monthly magazine type publication with more photos and instructions to cadres and hamlet committees and militia.

Other: Youth Center—Plans now being developed by Reconstruction Chief for renovation of a large building in town to serve as Provincial Youth Center. Permission has been requested from Ministry of Interior for contact with Sacramento high schools to request assistance with equipping center. I am working on preparation of slide and tape presentation to send to Sacramento.