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MCNAMARA MEMO ON HALBERSTAM ARTICLE

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REGISTRY OF THE HISTORY OF THE UNITED STATES AND THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES

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N4K-87-215

THE SECRETARY OF DEFENSE
WASHINGTON

21 September 1963

MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

SUBJECT: David Halberstam Article, "Rift With Saigon
on War Tactics Underlined by 2 Red Attacks",
New York Times, 16 September 1963

In your memorandum dated 16 September 1963, you inquired as to the accuracy of subject article and whether there is a split between our military and the Vietnamese on the strategic hamlet program in the Delta area.

Attached is an analysis, based upon reports received from the U.S. Military Assistance Command, as well as country team statistics. It indicates that there is no rift between our military and the Vietnamese on the program and that the article contains other inaccuracies.

Robert S. McNamara

Robert S. McNamara

Attachment

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ANALYSIS OF
NEW YORK TIMES ARTICLE*
BY DAVID HALBERSTAM

In his 15 September story Mr. Halberstam writes that the U.S. has called for a stop to the strategic hamlet program, but the Vietnamese have insisted on continuing. He states that the U.S. has also suggested a complete revision of tactics in the delta. Both points are largely incorrect. In Mr. Halberstam's view, such a rift does exist, and is causing the war to be lost in the delta. He implies, however, that it might have been impossible to win there anyway.

The essence of the article is expressed in the paragraph, "We know the situation is terrible, we know it's deteriorating, and yet the Government is taking no steps whatsoever to correct it," one American said. Meanwhile, he added, the Viet Cong 'get stronger all the time.'"

Hard analysis of the article localizes itself into two questions:

* "Rift with Vietnam on War Tactics
Underlined by 2 Red Attacks",
New York Times, 15 September 1963.

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Question 1.

Is there a split between the U.S. military and the Vietnamese?

In other words, is there a disagreement of sufficient substance to have had an effect on the war? Do the Vietnamese military sit, "waiting for the executioner"? Are military policies in the delta now "virtually suicidal"?

Question 2.

Is the strategic hamlet effort in the delta a failure?

In other words, have attempts to build hamlets failed, "without exception"? Is it true that the Government is taking no steps whatsoever to correct a "deteriorating" situation?

The pages that follow address these two basic questions in detail.

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Question 1

Is there a split between the U.S. military and the Vietnamese?

The article claims the existence a U.S.-Vietnamese policy disagreement of such grave proportions as to cause defeat in the delta. There are two main contentions made. The first is that the U.S. called for a stop to hamlet construction; the Vietnamese refused. The second is that the U.S. suggested complete revision of the tactics in the delta including strengthening the forces there. Presumably the Vietnamese also refused to do this.

Article states:

"Bold Communist attacks....have underlined basic disagreements on policy between Americans and Vietnamese."

"Concerned about the vulnerability of Government-held communities in the area, the Americans recommended four months ago drastic changes in policy there...They called for an immediate stop to the construction on strategic hamlets, the fortified villages populated by Vietnamese brought from isolated areas."

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Facts are:

There is no split between the U.S. military in Vietnam and the Vietnamese authorities on the strategic hamlet program. All hamlets built or being built have received the approval of the U.S. Inter-agency Committee on Province Rehabilitation.

The fact that the provincial strategic hamlet construction programs have been indorsed by the country team does not mean there has not been criticism of the manner in which some province chiefs have implemented the approved program. In some instances, province chiefs, through over-zealousness or for other reasons have disregarded the basic military principles of mutual support and expansion from a secure base outward. This has resulted in the creation of some hamlets in insecure areas.

In a few other cases hamlets were established to "plant the flag" in areas which for many years had defied any central authority. This had the effect of declaring a Vietnamese intention to wrest control from the Viet Cong in his oldest stronghold.

Critics of the strategic hamlet program ignore its most significant aspect, when they interpret problems in implementation as failure of the program.

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More germane is the point that, in the period of about a year and a half, over 9,000,000 people have been settled into strategic hamlets. The resettlement, housing, training, equipping, and organization of 68% of a nation's population would be impressive in any environment, but to accomplish this in a primitive, rural nation, engaged in total war is monumental. In the delta alone almost 4,000,000 people are now living in strategic hamlets. In a program of this size, it is not surprising that mistakes have been made along the way.

What remains now is to "tidy up the battlefield", and consolidate gains. Both the Vietnamese and U.S. military realize this; there is no "rift".

Article states:

"They (the Americans) also suggested the strengthening of the few positions the Government held in the peninsula and an almost complete revision in Government attitudes and tactics there."

Facts are:

This, written under the sub-title "Wanted Tactics Revised", is the "Rift with Vietnam on War Tactics"

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BASIC STRATEGY OF PHASE II NATIONAL CAMPAIGN PLAN

SEPT 1963 STATUS OF NATIONAL
CAMPAIGN PLAN:

DECISION HAS BEEN MADE
TO SHIFT MAIN EFFORT TO
SOUTH. 9TH DIVISION WILL
BE REDEPLOYED FROM
II CORPS TO IV CORPS.

STRATEGICALLY IMPORTANT
PROVINCES OF KIEN TUONG,
LONG AN, DINH TUONG

• SAIGON

AN XUYEN
PROVINCE

4. FINAL BATTLES WILL
PROBABLY BE FOUGHT
HERE.

2. THEY WILL BE MOVED TO THIS
AREA, TO SEPARATE VC FORCES
IN DELTA FROM THOSE REMAIN-
ING IN PLATEAU AND PLAINS OF
THE NORTH.

3. AS VC ARE CONTAINED IN
THIS BELT, MAIN EFFORT WILL
PROGRESSIVELY SHIFT TO THE
SOUTH.

1. AS NATIONAL CAMPAIGN
PLAN ADVANCES AND FORCES
CAN BE RELEASED IN THE
NORTH

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described in the title of the article, alleging un-
heeded U.S. suggestions for strengthening the positions
in the delta and revising tactics.

Actually, no recommendation for drastic and rapid
changes in policy regarding the Ca Mau peninsula have
yet been advanced by any responsible U.S. military
official.

The basic Vietnamese strategy around which the war
is being fought is the National Campaign Plan. (See
Chart facing page) The rational prosecution of that
plan envisions first, Viet Cong destruction or con-
tainment in the north, followed by progressive shifting
of forces south into the delta as the situation in
the north permits. The main effort in the delta is
then to be in the belt running across Vietnam south
of Saigon. The aim is to isolate the enemy forces in
the delta from those remaining in the north, and thus
simplify the later problem of clearing the remote areas
such as An Xuyen. Thus relocation of additional
forces from the plateau and coastal plains is not to
be immediately to An Xuyen, as Mr. Halberstam would
prefer, but instead, in the northern delta, to serve
a more meaningful role in the scheme of battle.

*Decision
from
future
plan*

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This is the essence of the national campaign plan, which has been in existence for more than a year. It was developed mutually by the Vietnamese and U.S. military and concurred in by both. The Vietnamese have now advanced well into the execution of that plan. The decision was reached in early September that the war was progressing to the point that forces could soon be redeployed southward from the plateau to the delta. On 17 September the 9th Division was selected to be the unit redeployed. This is now being accomplished.

Mr. Halberstam's belief that the desire to reinforce the delta is unique to the American military, reveals a lack of knowledge of the National Campaign Plan.

Article states:

"Americans considered the situation so serious that eight months ago, it is reliably reported, they suspended their share of the strategic hamlet funds allocated to An Xuyen Province, part of the peninsula. About \$100,000 is said to have been held back."

Facts are:

No substantial sum of money was ever held back from An Xuyen.

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Article states:

"Americans have tried without success to persuade the Government to tear down 20 small and frail outposts in An Xuyen."

And referring to an attack on a platoon-size outpost, "The outpost was burned down by the Communists. But, according to the American sources, the post will be rebuilt."

Facts are:

The article mixes comments on strategic hamlets with those about outposts, two entirely different subjects. The inference is that elimination of the small outposts is not indorsed by the Vietnamese.

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[Actually their elimination is a priority item in the National Campaign Plan, and is being pushed by the Vietnamese Joint General Staff and by the Corps Commanders.] The problem here, like the rest which have dictated U.S. presence in Vietnam is one of implementation. Status must be measured in terms of progress, not in terms of how much remains to be done.

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The attack on Cai Nuoc was less fortunate. The attacking Viet Cong force escaped before they could be engaged by nearby reinforcements. The Viet Cong were pursued until darkness, when they escaped via sampans.

The Dam Doi attack exploded in the Viet Cong's face; the one on Cai Nuoc had more success. However, these two isolated actions do not define a delta-wide trend. Mr. Halberstam could have said, more accurately, that, in the four weeks preceding the dateline of the article, [773 Viet Cong were killed, in the delta; the Vietnamese, both regular and paramilitary had 182 killed in the same area,] a ratio of better than four-to-one in favor of the Vietnamese.

Or he could also have said that from mid-July to the date of the article the Viet Cong had an average of 236 killed each week, and that the weekly average of Vietnamese killed was 63.

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Question 2

IS THE STRATEGIC HAMLET EFFORT IN THE
DELTA A FAILURE?

QUESTION 2

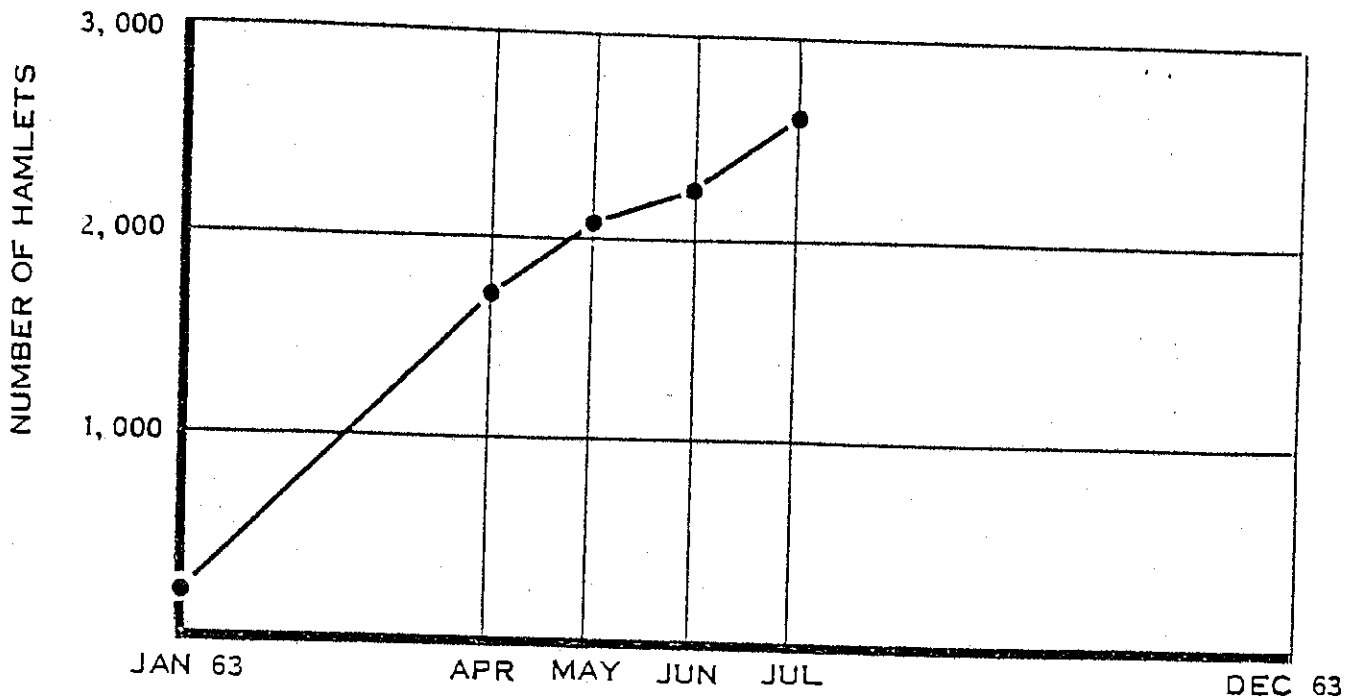
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IV CORPS (DELTA) STRATEGIC HAMLET PROGRAM

HAMLET GROWTH



DELTA POPULATION * IN COMPLETED HAMLETS

	TOTAL PERSONS	% OF TOTAL DELTA POPULATION
JAN 63	—	LESS THAN 5 %
MAY 63	3, 150, 266	54 %
JUL 63	3, 722, 496	64 %

* JULY 1963 DELTA POPULATION ESTIMATED AT 5, 833, 826

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Question 2

Is the strategic hamlet effort in the delta a failure?

Article states:

"....Viet Cong (Communist) roots are so deep in the area that, as one said, 'attempts to build hamlets have without exception failed.'"

Facts are:

The facts directly contradict this assertion. The chart on the opposite page shows numbers of hamlets built in the delta; more than 2,500 this year. This is clearly not a program which has, "without exception failed". [The delta hamlet program, essentially non-existent in January 1963, has grown to embrace 64% of the delta's rural population.]

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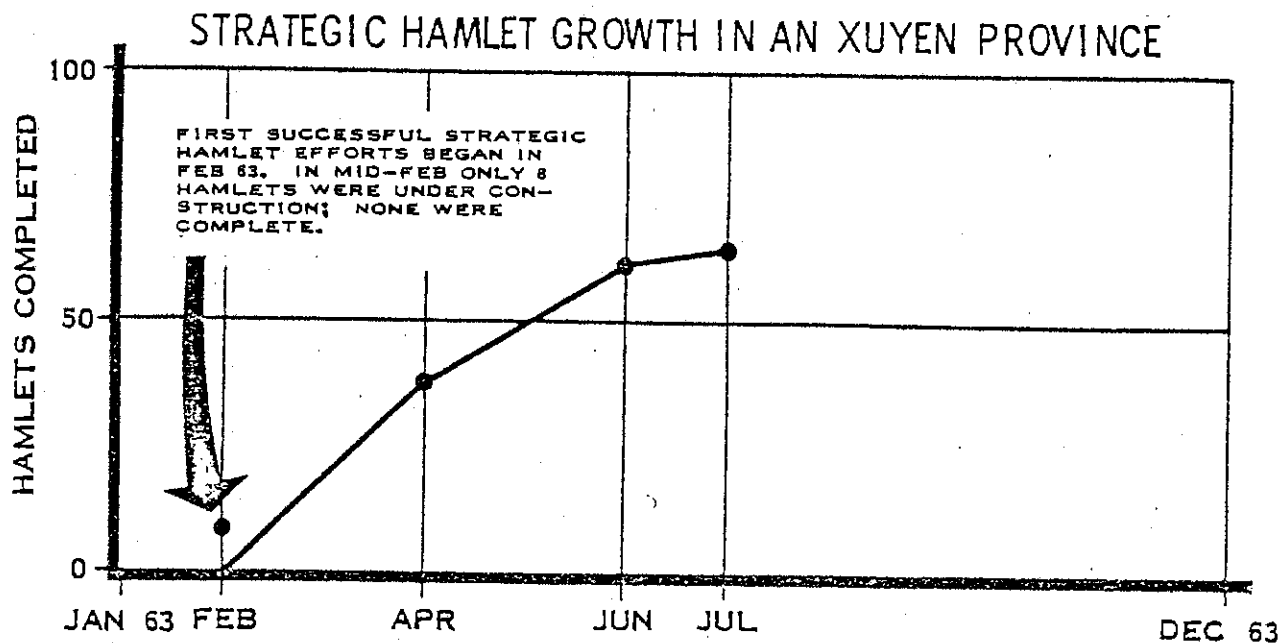
The chart on the following page shows strategic hamlet growth in An Xuyen province, which is the most inaccessible, remote and forbidding area in South Vietnam. [From an initial zero early this year, there are now over 60 hamlets in the province.]

The numbers involved are not so dramatic

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as in other, softer areas, but the rate of growth is highly encouraging, especially since An Xuyen represents what is probably the most difficult counterinsurgency problem in the Viet Cong war, one which was never solved by either the Japanese or French.



To make a realistic appraisal of the strategic hamlet program, one must also be able to distinguish between a strategic hamlet and a military outpost, a distinction Mr. Halberstam fails to make. In Vietnam a "military outpost" is one of the tiny "Beau Geste" forts, a

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rapidly disappearing souvenir of the French which is still seen in the remote areas.

The strategic hamlet is quite different from the military outpost and considerably more than a fortified village. It is a means by which a measure of civic order is brought to unidentifiable masses of rural people. Vietnam is a nation which has never had a national census. These areas had no effective postal system and no modern communications, transportation or education system. In most cases the people were unable to identify themselves with the local or national government. There was no way for them to feel that they played a part in a centrally directed anti-Viet Cong effort.

The military training and arming of village defenders has been an important aspect of the hamlet program, but probably more important the program has provided a vehicle through which improvements in rural aid and rural education could be implemented. And it has given the individuals an identity as citizens of a community, which is part of a national anti-Communist effort.

Undoubtedly, the program has pressed many Viet Cong into hamlets. However, even in the hard-core areas, there are major advantages, since it is now infinitely easier to follow the activities of people who have been processed through a hamlet organization.

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Article states:

"Post commanders are hesitant to do any patrolling least they incur Viet Cong wrath. As a result, intelligence is virtually non-existent and the men, as one American said, "sit there waiting for the executioner."

And in the same vein: "Some Americans and some lower-ranking Vietnamese feel that present policies are virtually suicidal."

Facts are:

Here, and throughout the article is a picture of doomed men, isolated from any outside communication, huddled in tiny forts, waiting to be butchered by the Viet Cong.

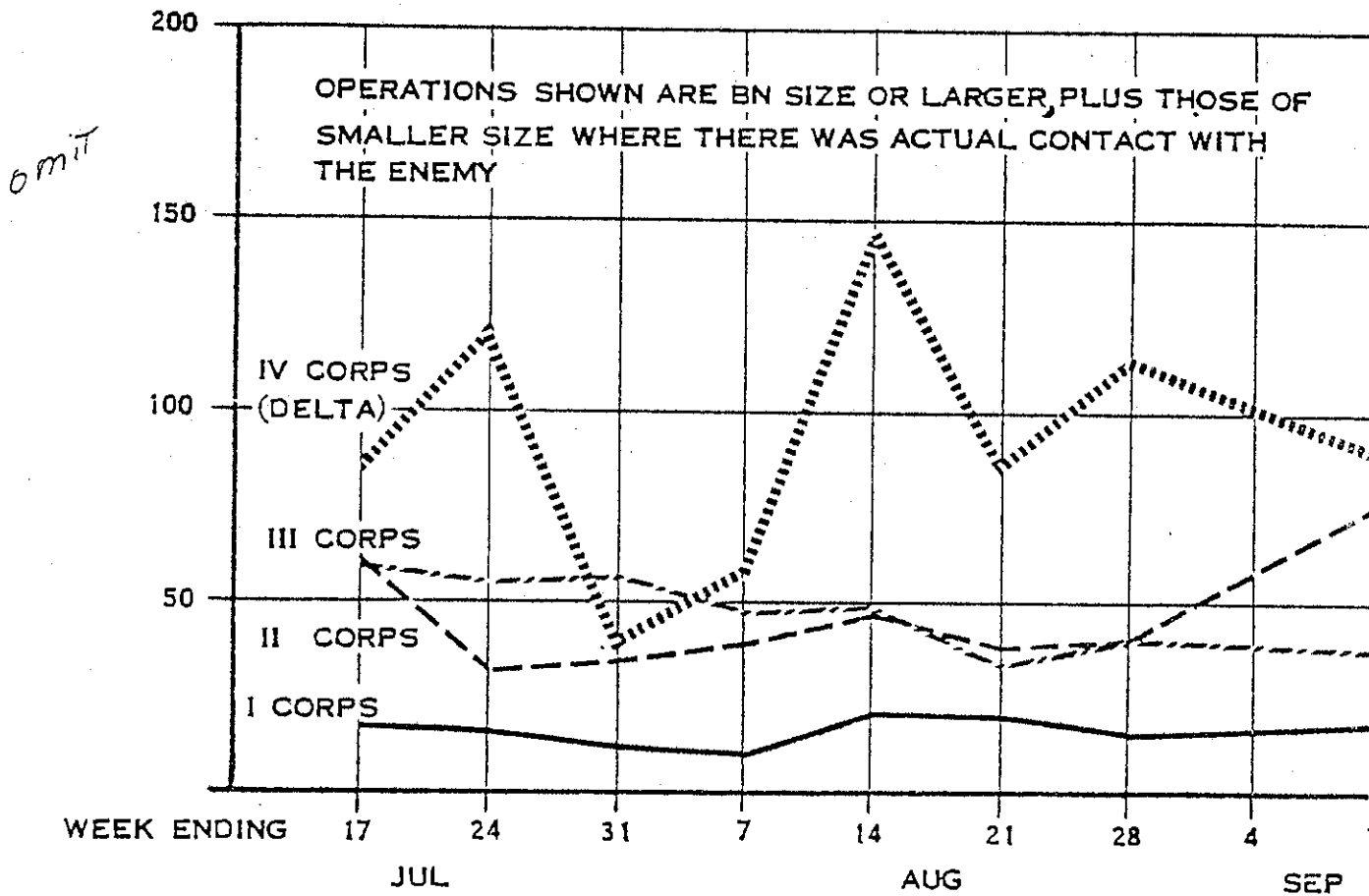
The pace of offensive actions conducted by the Vietnamese in the delta belies a broken spirit. On the contrary, rates at which the Viet Cong are being hunted down show an aggressive and determined Vietnamese military, and one which has no intention of waiting passively to be slaughtered. The following chart shows weekly offensive operations in the delta alongside the numbers conducted in the other three tactical zones. It also shows that the number of operations carried out in the delta is roughly equal to the total conducted in the rest of South Vietnam.

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In the past six months, Vietnamese fighting in the delta has inflicted 10,127 casualties upon the Viet Cong. This is not the record of a military force who merely "sit there waiting for the executioner".

RVNAF WEEKLY OFFENSIVE OPERATIONS BY CORPS TACTICAL ZONE



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