Indochina Refugee Authored Monograph Program

Intelligence
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HISTORY OF INTELLIGENCE ACTIVITY IN VIETNAM WAR
INDOCHINA REFUGEE Authored MONOGRAPH PROGRAM

INTELLIGENCE

by

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The war in Vietnam was often called an intelligence war. The challenges and responsibilities placed on the South Vietnam—United States—Free World intelligence community were great and constant. During this long war the entire intelligence program improved each day as our data base expanded, as more was learned about the elusive enemy, personnel were trained, and new procedures and techniques were tested and found effective.

The most rewarding experience in intelligence activities during the Vietnam war was the very close cooperation and coordination between American and Vietnamese military intelligence personnel and systems. It was this cooperation that helped RVNAF military intelligence upgrade and become self-reliant during the post-cease-fire period.

This monograph attempts to record all the facts concerning intelligence activities, its organizations and coordination procedures, its successes and failures during the period from 1965 to the final days of the Republic of Vietnam. In this attempt, one of the difficulties I faced was the lack of documentation to help make my work more accurate and more substantial. To overcome this shortcoming, I have interviewed several former colleagues of mine, American and Vietnamese, all of them highly experienced with intelligence activities in Vietnam. Apart from their invaluable contributions, most of the writing was based on my personal knowledge and experience.

I am indebted to General Cao Van Vien, Chairman of the Joint General Staff, Lieutenant General Dong Van Khuyen, Chief of Staff—under whom I served several years as Assistant Chief of Staff J2, JCS—and
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McLean, Virginia
31 October 1976

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

During the Vietnam war, there was a constant improvement of intelligence as each day passed. It is usually recognized that during the final years of cooperation between the Republic of Vietnam and United States combat forces, the commanders at most echelons were better informed about the enemy than in any war in the histories of these two nations.

This was made possible because of the close coordination and cooperation between RVN and US Military Intelligence personnel and activities. This cooperation of joint planning, execution and exchange of information was essential because the RVN and the US were faced with an elusive enemy who, justifiably enough, earned such rhetorical qualifications as "unknown" or "mythical". Knowledge about the enemy, as we confronted him in Vietnam, was not an easy proposition. But it was not an unattainable goal, nor did it elude our success altogether.

There is general agreement that the Vietnam war was a complex venture. It was this complexity that heavily influenced intelligence activities and subjected them to unprecedented challenges. As a result, an examination of intelligence, its organizations, its successes and failures must be made in the context of the war and preceded by an insight into its nature, its historical perspective and the opposing views that each side held with regard to its basic goals in this war.
A recent popular Vietnamese folk song about the war laments:

"A thousand years of domination by the Chinese invaders, A hundred years of domination by the French invaders, Twenty years of internecine fighting, day in day out." \(^1\)

In just a few phrases, the song eloquently sums up the long history of Vietnam, the history of a small nation constantly plagued by wars. Through many invasions from the North, the Chinese repeatedly attempted to annex the tiny Viet nation, and to subjugate and assimilate the Viet people. During the ten centuries of Chinese domination, from 111 B.C. to 938 A.D., numerous Vietnamese heroes rose up against the invaders to wrest back their independence. No Vietnamese can forget the story of Trieu Quang Phuc, the first Vietnamese military leader who employed guerrilla tactics to defeat the invaders of the Liang kingdom (7th century), or Emperor Quang Trung who, by a surprise blitzkrieg, annihilated the Ching corps at the end of the 18th century. \(^2\)

Then came the French who created a colony out of Vietnam for nearly a century from 1858 to 1945. The history of Vietnam under French suzerainty abounds in heroic uprisings and resistance movements, all of them waged with the sole purpose of reclaiming national identity and independence. Not until 1945 was this independence finally restored and precariously maintained before the whole nation was plunged into war against the French who sought again to impose their rule. It was unfortunate that this anti-colonialist war, although fought by the whole people, was led by hard line Communist cadres. This was gradually to

\(^1\) "Mother's Legacy", composed by Trinh Cong Son.

\(^2\) The given name of Emperor Quang Trung is Nguyen Hue. The Communists chose Nguyen Hue as code name for their 1972 Easter Offensive because they were greatly impressed by the blitzkrieg tactic used by the Emperor to annihilate 200,000 Ching invaders in 1789.
change the nature of the war when it became apparent that the Viet Minh regime was leaning toward socialism through the "agrarian reform" of 1950.

Up until that time, the Viet Minh had not revealed the future direction of their regime. The people believed they fought a sacrosanct war for national independence, no one anticipated that the cause they were fighting for was to serve the Communist leaders' own purpose.

In 1950, the Viet Minh leaders launched a country-wide "Agrarian Reform" campaign, the first step toward creating an egalitarian society. This proved to be their biggest mistake because the excesses and brutality of zealous cadres completely alienated the land-owners and, by extension, most of the educated "petite bourgeoisie." It was a turning point and the seed of ideological difference, heretofore submerged beneath the patriotic fervor, began to take roots.

But the real turnabout came when the Republic of Vietnam became an independent nation south of the 17th parallel. For the first time since 1945, a sense of national identity prevailed — which emboldened the Vietnamese of the South to defy and oppose the Communist regime in the North. Now that they were able to live under a regime of their choice, they were willing to defend it when it came under threat.

It was not the first time though that the Vietnamese fought among themselves. During its long history, Vietnam had been the theater of many fratricidal wars, the longest and hardest of which lasted over a century, from 1627 to 1774. This was the contest between the Trinh dynasty in the North and the Nguyen dynasty in the South. Within a period of forty-five years, large-scale warfare broke out six times in the Dong Hoi area (16th parallel) between the feuding dynasties. In the end, both sides were exhausted and neither was powerful enough to dominate.

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3 The Agrarian Reform campaign gave rise to many resentments among the Vietnamese population, and even among Communist cadres and troops. Truong Chinh who was responsible for this campaign, was then released from his post as secretary general of the Labor Party in 1956 by order of Ho Chi Minh.
the other. So they reconciled their difference and agreed to coexist on either side of the 16th parallel until 1774 when the Tay Son dynasty defeated both of them and reunified the country.

The remarkable thing about all these civil wars was that no matter which dynasty came to power, the regime remained basically the same and monarchy was maintained. The people by and large hardly felt any difference in their lives.

However, as early as in 1945, when the national purpose focused on reclaiming independence, first from the Japanese and later from the French, a new and most difficult question arose concerning what kind of regime was in store for Vietnam in the immediate future. For although the people would readily accept any government within a definite regime, they would not readily consent to any regime. As a result, a shift in national purpose gradually took hold and the struggle for independence gradually gave way to a conflict whose objective became the search for an appropriate political system. This polarization of political convictions among the Vietnamese turned the conflict into an ideological war fought between the Communists on one side and the Nationalists on the other.

For twenty years, this war dragged on. Its duration was a measure of its complexity because, in contrast with the Trinh-Nguyen contest which was local in nature, the war between the North and the South of Vietnam today was fought under the influence and with the implications of an international conflict.

Communist Viewpoint

To the North Vietnamese, their war aimed at achieving a socialist regime for Vietnam. In their view, the war was a just war led by the Communist Party on behalf of the working class. Their duty lay not only with the national cause but also with the international Communist movement, because the history of international proletarian revolution greatly influenced the way North Vietnam conducted the war. For them, the 1917
Russian Revolution and the Chinese Communist take-over of 1949 had
invaluable lessons to be applied to the Vietnam war. As a matter of
fact, the North Vietnamese conduct of the war almost exactly dupli-
cated the pattern used by the Chinese Communists. The handbook en-
titled "Out Enduring Resistance Certainly Wins" by Truong-Chinh who is
considered as North Vietnam's foremost theoretician, contains arguments
drawn from Mao Tse Tung's work, "Yu Chi Chan" (Protracted War). Accord­ing
to Truong-Chinh, the Vietnam war and the war in China bear remark­
able resemblance in that they were both fought against much larger and
more powerful enemies. Consequently, success must depend upon the time
factor. Time was necessary, Truong-Chinh argued, to create a balance
of forces which would increasingly favor the underdog.

Oriental philosophy is at the source of this concept of time.
Whereas the Western world thinks of time in the short term (time is
money), and favors the military concept of lightning war (blitzkrieg)
and speedy victory, the Orientals believe they have all the time they
need to achieve their goals. To them, perseverance is the key to
success. As a result, the guiding principle in China as well as in
Vietnam is to "give up space in order to gain time". Hence, the funda­
mental approach to conflict is the conduct of protracted war. The
Communists theorized that a protracted war of resistance would progress
through three military phases: 4

First stage: Strategy — defensive; tactics — attack
Second stage: Strategy — stiff resistance (preparing for offensive);
tactics — attack
Third stage: Strategy and tactics — counter-offensive

In more descriptive terms, Phase 1 aims at organizing, consolidating
and preserving forces; Phase 2 aims at progressively expanding the forces
and Phase 3 is the decisive phase whose aim is the destruction of the
enemy. The transition from one phase to the next was discussed by Ho Chi
Minh, "It is possible to examine the general situation in order to divide
it into big stages, but it is not possible to cut off completely one stage

4 Truong Chinh, Primer for Revolt (Praeger, New York, London 1963),
p. 154.
from the other like cutting bread. The length of each stage depends on the situation in the home country and in the world, and on the changes between the enemy forces and ours."

Truong-Chinh follows in Mao's steps when he asserts that Phase 3 can be extended because of the possibility of negotiations. The customary concepts of reciprocation, of give and take, are not included in Truong-Chinh's idea of negotiation. The Revolution's goal excludes compromise. Negotiations are conducted with the sole purpose of gaining time, the time necessary to consolidate friendly forces and at the same time to attrite and wear down the enemy. In his work, "People's War, People's Army," Vo Nguyen Giap reasserts that the concept of protracted resistance and the three-phase strategy are the most correct military conduct to confront the enemy's military strategy of lightning attack and lightning success. According to Giap, protracted war will evolve from guerrilla warfare to conventional warfare and a war of movement coordinated with attacks against enemy's strongholds. Guerrilla warfare is the kind of war fought by an armed force which is technically inferior and lesser-equipped, but which prevails because it has the morale and spirit to challenge and overcome advanced weapons and technique. However, as Mao observes, guerrilla warfare cannot achieve victory because it can only be likened to the mud which bogs down an enemy but can never destroy him. Hence, guerrilla warfare ought to be closely coordinated with a war of movement and the relative importance of its role depends on the situation pertaining to each phase.

Protracted war, however, cannot be conducted if all the people, all ages and both sexes, do not participate in it, and the people in the rear of the battlefield must support the front. Lenin wrote, "In order to wage a real war, there must be a solid and well organized rear." The concept of people's war includes the concept of participation and contribution. Truong Chinh emphasized, "Wealthy people should contribute their wealth, strong people should contribute their strength, talented people should contribute their talents to the Resistance," for war is not fought only on the military front, it is also fought in all other areas:
political, economic and cultural. Political warfare seeks to unite the entire people, while diplomatic activities gain the sympathy of all the world and isolate the enemy.

The economic struggle strives to achieve a self-sufficient economy and at the same time to "encircle" the enemy's economy by sabotaging all instruments of production and preventing the enemy from "using the war to feed the war." The cultural struggle must forge thoughts in order to create in the people the spirit and endurance required for a long war. Various forms of traditional propaganda like folk songs, group singing, and plays are used to inflame the people's spirit with new thought and dedication.

The three elements: "protracted," "all people" and "total" are the three principal elements for the conduct of the people's war, as Mao Tse Tung laid them down. However, the Vietnamese Communists have applied this concept of the people's war with creativeness of their own in order to fit the circumstances and exploit the situation in Vietnam. The situation changed radically after the Geneva Agreement in 1954 which created two political regimes, one in the North and one in the South. In 1960, when North Vietnam became seriously intent on conquering the South, its strategy in South Vietnam still bore the specific imprint of the "people's war." Nevertheless, the term "people's war" apparently was no longer deemed expedient by the North because it would imply the aggressive character of the war. As a result, another label was chosen for the war being waged in the South, a "revolutionary war," which implied that it was generated by the people of South Vietnam who revolted to overthrow the government of South Vietnam. The goal of the Revolution was to establish a people's "democratic" regime before crossing over to socialism. But whether "people's war" or "revolutionary war," the strategy still called for a protracted struggle to be conducted in three phases. But the concept of protracted war has undergone some change. While maintaining that their strategy was still a protracted war, the North Vietnamese argued that they could achieve their goal in a relatively short time. It is noteworthy that this change in concept could have taken place at the time when there were strong indications that the United States would soon become

directly involved in the Vietnam war. The fear that the people and cadre might lose heart at the prospects of a prolonged war against a great power impelled Le Duan, the Party's secretary general, to this argument. He emphasized that North Vietnam, having learned from experiences of the 1945-54 war, could achieve an early victory. In order to achieve this early victory, the Communists launched the general offensive, general uprising of 1968, or in conceptual terms, passed on to Phase 3.

After the offensive failed, there was an animated debate among the Communist cadres over the validity of the three-phase strategy. If the strategy were still valid, it implied that the Communists had admitted to the failure of Phase 3 and a retrogression to Phase 2. In effect, through COSVN Resolution No. 9 issued in July 1969 the Communists directed a reversion to the earlier phase through "small attacks but assured successes." They presented a new argument for it, advocating abandonment of the three-phase strategy and instituting a single phase, the offensive. They insisted that the "revolutionary war" of the South had become a total "people's war" involving all the people of Vietnam, North and South, and all aspects of their lives, and that the North had always been the "great rear area of the great front-line area."

South Vietnam Viewpoint

While the Communists always developed and expounded a clearly defined concept of the conduct of the war, the Republic of Vietnam never had a unified concept. To South Vietnam, the war was a defense against Communist aggression from the North. South Vietnam was an advanced outpost of the anti-Communist front in Southeast Asia. As such, it was entitled to help, to receive substantial aid for as long as it was necessary from the Free World, represented by the United States. Since it was a defensive war, its military strategy was to

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6 Captured enemy document, corroborated by POW's and ralliers.
7 Ibid.
push ahead with the pacification of the territory and the population, to free them from the influence and threat of the Communists. To confront guerrilla warfare, the Army of South Vietnam had been organized and trained along the lines of a conventional army heavily dependent on fire power and mobility. Military tactics were based on conventional techniques and modern weapons. This was the inevitable by-product of the political circumstances prevailing in South Vietnam. The political instability in South Vietnam resulting from skirmishes between the various religious sects, the "revolution" of 1 November 1963, and the subsequent developments compelled total reliance on the US strategy in the conduct of the war from 1965 to 1969. The strategy called for the expansion of the RVN Armed Forces, from 400,000 to 1,100,000 men and their gradual take-over of combat responsibilities. Following the 8 June 1969 Midway Conference a new program was initiated called Vietnamization. The armed forces of the Republic of Vietnam would gradually accept full responsibility for ground combat operations in place of US forces which along with other Allied forces, would be withdrawn from South Vietnam battlefields. After the Paris Agreement of 1973, and faced with the new military situation and the prospect of diminishing aid, a new concept was conceived for the conduct of the war, "fighting a poor man's war." A lesson was learned from this attempt, however. It is easier for an armed force to upgrade from guerrilla warfare to conventional warfare than the other way around.

Comparisons

In the Vietnam war, both North and South Vietnam depended heavily on foreign aid for every rifle, every cartridge, every drop of fuel and even every grain of rice. The major difference between the two sides resided in the fact that while receiving military and economic assistance, North Vietnam consistently conditioned their population and army psychologically to achieve self-sufficiency, relying primarily on their own

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resources and regarding aid as simply supplemental. This was not the case with South Vietnam for which foreign aid was a way of life. To the government as well as to the population, it was always expected that this abundant US aid would not terminate for as long as it was needed.

In addition, during the whole course of the war, North Vietnam enjoyed a continuity of leadership. From the start to the end, the same leaders directed the war effort and so there was consistency and continuity in the planning and conduct of the war. Furthermore, the institution had a memory and learned from experience. In contrast, political instability in South Vietnam denied it these advantages of leadership.

The war in Vietnam was an ideological war and also a war of mass psychology. For the North Vietnamese, who knew how to use their ideology to influence and take advantage of mass psychology, their war had proceeded in accordance with the rules they had laid out or projected. In contrast, not only was South Vietnam unable to employ mass psychology to support its ideological purpose, it had let mass psychology act on the rules of its war to the extent that, in the final months, a mere tactical blunder had turned into an uncontrollable event that set in motion the rapid deterioration of the situation. Perhaps this was a peculiarity of the Vietnam war.

Role of Intelligence in the Vietnam War

The importance of intelligence, as it influences political and military activities, is no matter of dispute. But while there exists universal agreement as to its importance, different concepts exist concerning the role of intelligence in decision-making, different subjective biases have influenced objective analysis of intelligence information, and differing technological capabilities have determined, to a large extent, the priorities adopted by nations in the employment of intelligence collection systems. Thus, national ideology and characteristics have greatly influenced the development of concepts and techniques of intelligence collection,
analysis and exploitation. So when an examination is made of the intelligence effort of each of the parties involved in the Vietnam war, all the characteristics, strengths, and weaknesses of each participant can be found reflected in the way he organized and employed his intelligence systems.

North Vietnam placed great emphasis on intelligence. Its intelligence was organized and operated to achieve the political and military objectives of the war. Its intelligence structure was unified at the top, but the universal rule of compartmentalization was observed in the operation of human intelligence collection. North Vietnam placed greatest emphasis on human intelligence and included in this category was the institution of people's intelligence, conforming to the "all people" and "total" character of the people's war.

The US intelligence apparatus in Vietnam was part of and within the framework of the total US intelligence establishment. Thus, it relied primarily on advancements in science and technology. It reflected the characteristics of a great power which could afford a multiplicity of big organizations, each having its own collection apparatus and often competing with one another in collection, analysis and production of knowledge about the enemy. The contributions made by US intelligence, particularly in collection, were so effective that they created an abnormal reliance on US intelligence. The reliance was so great that many Vietnamese officials, including some military commanders, took it for granted that every piece of information coming from an American agency was valid regardless of the professional competence of the reporter or the authority of the source. Others even believed that no enemy move or scheme could ever go undetected by US collection networks and that if it did it was only because the US, for political reasons, wanted it to happen that way.

**Brief History of RVN Intelligence**

This over-reliance on US intelligence stemmed in part from the relative infancy of South Vietnamese intelligence. Small elements of the National Army of Vietnam were created as early as May 1950 but its general
staff was not organized until two years later. By this time the army's strength had reached 120,000. The first coherent South Vietnamese military intelligence organization was the J-2 element of the General Staff, with 32 men commanded by a Vietnamese captain. The Military Security Service (counterintelligence) activated at about the same time, was commanded by a Vietnamese major. In early 1953, a counterintelligence element was added to the General Staff as a separate staff component designated J-6. By July 1955, the authorized strength of J-2, General Staff, had been augmented to 46 with the activation of the Imagery Interpretation Center. But up until the day the Geneva Accords were signed in 1954, South Vietnamese military intelligence activities were performed by the French Forces' "Deuxieme Bureau" which functioned as a separate organization and acted on its own initiative. Unfortunately, but characteristically, when the French Forces withdrew from Vietnam they took with them all their experience and systems of collection as well as their intelligence files.

The Vietnamese officers who manned the J-2 section of the General Staff at that time were not career intelligence men. Only a handful of them had taken a basic, battalion-level intelligence course conducted by a French Officer at the Thu Duc Reserve Officer School. As required by the activation of new units, or the upgrading of existing ones, there was an urgent need to train intelligence officers. In September 1955, a number of English-speaking officers were selected to attend a Military Intelligence Course in the Philippines. They became the first instructors of the newly created Intelligence School. The incipient character of Vietnamese military intelligence was reflected by the original training materials prepared for the school. For example, in a training text on the subject "Importance of Intelligence in Combat," there was the following passage: "A newly commissioned Second Lieutenant was assigned to a unit. When he reported to the unit commander, the latter said, I will make you Intelligence Officer of the Battalion." "Consequently,"

the text went on, "intelligence is very important." It is possible that the instructor may have thought that he was adequately illustrating the point that intelligence was important enough to be considered on a par with other staff functions.

Politics and Intelligence

From 1954 to 1963, military intelligence efforts were largely oriented toward collecting domestic political intelligence. It was the period of political turmoil during which leaders of the First Republic were faced with armed rebellions of religious sects in 1955-1956 and later with the Buddhist opposition movement in 1963. The South Vietnamese intelligence structure during that time was an agglomeration of separate agencies each directly or indirectly controlled by the Presidency, but all serving the same political goal of consolidating the new regime. Under the Presidency, the Service of Social and Political Studies was responsible for domestic political intelligence collection while the Service of Liaison was charged with foreign intelligence, directed primarily toward North Vietnam, and later on—with security protection for the President and his closest advisers, Mr. and Mrs. Ngo Dinh Nhu. When the Buddhist opposition movement reached its climax in 1963 with the active participation of students, all intelligence agencies, both on the civilian side and the military side, focused their activities on gathering domestic political information. The J-2 of the Joint General Staff thus found himself performing a task that went beyond his intended mission and authority.

The November Revolution of 1963 brought about a complete reversal of the process by decentralizing the intelligence structure and making its constituent organizations separate and responsible to various authorities. Thus, from a situation of complete centralization in the office of the Presidency, the national organization for intelligence went to the opposite extreme. The interplay of politics and competition for power never permitted intelligence to achieve one of its basic operating principles, unification of effort. The Service of Liaison found itself
placed under the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, the 300th Special Group, the strategic intelligence organization, was detached from J-2 and made responsible to the Office of the Chief of Staff, Joint General Staff. The Signal Intelligence Unit was attached to the Central Intelligence Office which reported directly to the Chief of State. Despite this subordination signal intelligence was often fed directly to field units without reference to or coordination with OACS, J-2. In 1964, when the government was turned over to civilians, the signal intelligence organization became an independent agency and was initially placed under the Ministry of Defense. Later, it was formed into a staff division and placed under the control of the Chief of Staff, JGS, with the designation J-7. Next the Military Security Service was transferred. It was placed under the General Directorate of Political Warfare instead of under the Ministry of Defense. This organizational concept was patterned after the Republic of China.

The domestic political situation made its impact on military intelligence. Lacking centralization and unified guidance, intelligence efforts became diffused and of little value. Adding to the problems, during this embryonic stage intelligence facilities were woefully inadequate and intelligence personnel still lacked technical know-how and professional experience. The military intelligence organizations operated independently of each other and the collection effort was limited geographically to South Vietnam. Intelligence pertaining to North Vietnam or Eastern Laos was produced only occasionally and did not constitute a systematic effort under centralized planning and direction. On the civilian side, the Central Intelligence Office was in theory responsible for gathering domestic political intelligence and foreign intelligence, both military and political. In practice, however, due to the political upheavals of the period, it concentrated its efforts on domestic politics, almost totally neglecting foreign intelligence. The General Directorate of National Police, which came under the Office of the Prime Minister, was responsible for public security and order, as well as intelligence concerning Communist infrastructure activities.
South Vietnamese military intelligence came of age in 1965 when, as a result of the increased tempo of war, the national leadership began to appreciate its importance. The active participation of United States forces in the war brought about close intelligence coordination with RVN forces, and it was this coordination that gave the greatest impetus to Vietnamese military intelligence. The most remarkable progress was achieved in combat intelligence. A tremendous amount of information was collected about the enemy. However remarkable the progress, the exploitation of new opportunities for collection and the tactical use of the intelligence produced were not developed to their full potential. Because of their lack of intelligence training and experience, most Vietnamese commanders did not understand that intelligence was theirs to direct and use and not the exclusive property and responsibility of their intelligence officer. As a consequence, no effective efforts were made to improve intelligence collection or exploitation. To these commanders, there was but one estimate, that of his intelligence officer. The commander's estimate was something seldom found. Most military operations were conducted for the purpose of destroying the enemy and very rarely indeed were they attempted for the sake of gathering intelligence.

Military intelligence resources were frequently misused or even abused. It became a widespread practice for Intelligence and Security Teams at District level and Intelligence and Security Sections at Province level to be used more often in VIP escort and protection duties than in intelligence gathering. Reconnaissance companies organic to division and regimental units were primarily deployed as shock units or reinforcements. A tragic example of this occurred in the battle of Phuoc Long in December 1974. While Communist forces included two infantry divisions supported by artillery and armor units, the defense of the city was assigned to three reconnaissance companies detached from their respective divisions, the 5th, 18th, and 25th Infantry Divisions. The result was that all three companies were totally destroyed, and the three divisions of MR-3 were without
reconnaissance capabilities when serious fighting broke out later.

Some commanders even went so far as to require their intelligence officers to produce estimates that befitted the commander's own view of the situation. If the commander's report on progress of pacification and development had been filled with good results, his intelligence officer was certainly not allowed to divulge any contradictory information, such as the increased activities of the enemy infrastructure, the enemy's success in collecting rice and taxes, etc. As an example, no effort had been made to report information contained in a captured enemy document indicating that during the first three months of 1973, the enemy in Dinh Tuong province had succeeded in collecting 40% of its $586$-million piaster tax goal for 1973. Apparently, if such a report had ever been made the province chief's good standing with the central government would have suffered, and he had to make sure this never happened. On the contrary, if friendly losses in any important operation surpassed the normally acceptable figure, reports might list the enemy's capabilities as including a great number of units whose identities were yet to be confirmed. This falsification of facts ostensibly justified the losses incurred and covered up any deficiency which might have caused them. Furthermore, it established the basis for obtaining more operational support.

Besides this widespread practice, there was also a dangerous tendency among commanders to show off the extent of their knowledge about the enemy. Many vital sources of information that should have been kept secret, either because of their origin or importance, were unfortunately made public.

The war in Vietnam, as mentioned earlier, was an ideological conflict in which politics strongly influenced military policies and dictated the conduct of the war. While North Vietnam successfully used its dictatorial regime as a solid basis for the effective organization and operation of its intelligence system, South Vietnam suffered from political instability and from the interference between factional and transitional politics and military intelligence affairs. To become
efficient and productive, an intelligence organization must be in effective command of time and space, because these two elements interweave and make up the intelligence coverage network. The larger the loops of the net, the greater the chance for the prey to escape. Time is necessary to provide continuity for intelligence operations. Space is needed to make knowledge thorough and complete. Knowledge about the enemy on the front line must be complemented by knowledge about the situation in his rear. In the case of the war in Vietnam, the enemy rear not only covered North Vietnam, it included by extension the whole Communist bloc, particularly the USSR and Red China.

Denied the capability to collect adequate information about the enemy outside South Vietnam and forced by internal political circumstances to operate a fragmented intelligence apparatus, South Vietnam intelligence agencies were ill equipped to perform their crucial tasks. In fact one might wonder, as in the other aspects of the war, whether internal rather than external factors most influenced the course of the war and brought about its tragic conclusion.
CHAPTER II

Intelligence, Culture, and Language

Characteristics of Vietnamese Culture and Language

Vietnam, because of its position in Southeast Asia, was initially a crossroads of two major civilizations that reacted vigorously with each other: the Chinese civilization and the Hindu civilization. The Chinese civilization finally prevailed and profoundly affected Vietnamese culture mainly because, in addition to the geographical proximity of the two countries, Vietnam had been politically subjugated by China for over a thousand years. During this long period of domination the Chinese attempted to absorb the Vietnamese people into their mass by direct assimilation. They imposed their philosophy, education, customs and manners, but the Vietnamese persistently resisted and endeavored to maintain their own culture and language. Although the Vietnamese borrowed their writing system from the Chinese for over ten centuries, they made a conscious effort to replace it gradually by a system of their own. Not until the 17th century (1627), however, was a romanized writing system created and officially adopted as the national script (Quoc Ngu). Chinese characters, as a result, were used only in traditional rites until recently. During the protracted struggle for survival and national independence, several Vietnamese generals of historical fame made use of cultural actions to win battles against Chinese invaders. General Ly Thuong Kiet of the Ly dynasty (10th century), for example, skillfully took advantage of the popular belief in mythology. In 1077, he planted one of his men in the Truong Hat temple to act as a demigod. To the accompaniment of bell tones, the man incanted a poem written in Chinese
characters that aroused the morale of Vietnamese troops and upon which the Chinese invaders recoiled in utter confusion:

The Emperor of the South rules over the land of the Southern Country;
This destiny has been indelibly registered in the Heavenly Book;
If you dare, rebellious savages, come violate it;
You shall undoubtedly witness your own and complete defeat. ¹

Confronting the powerful Mongolian army in 1284, the great Vietnamese national hero, Marshal Tran Hung Dao, appealed to his troops through a resounding proclamation that bolstered their confidence and determination to fight. Emboldened by the proclamation, his troops tattooed the words "Sat Dat" on their arms, meaning they were resolved to kill the Mongolians. ² Then, after defeating the Ming invaders in 1424, General Nguyen Trai issued the famous "Great Proclamation upon the Pacification of Wu", intended as a declaration of independence for the Vietnamese people and as an affirmation of viability of a separate national culture:

Our nation, Greater Vietnam,
Is founded on an ancient civilization.
Its land and boundaries have changed,
But its customs are always different from the North.³

¹Kham Dinh Viet Su, 1960, p. 101. The original text reads:

Nam Quoc Son Ha, Nam De Cu
Tiet Nhlen Dinh Menh Tai Thien Thu
Nhu Ha Nghich Lo Lai Xam Pham
Nhu Dang Hanh Khan Thu Bai Hu

²This practice was imitated by several ARVN troops after the 1968 general offensive. Instead of "Sat Dat", they tattooed "Sat Cong" (Kill Communists) on their arms.

³Excerpt from the original text which is written in Chinese characters. The Vietnamese translation of this passage reads:

Nuoc Dai Viet ta
Nen van hien cu
Non nuoc coi bo da khac
Bac, Nam, phong tuc van rieng
To the Vietnamese people, national independence was a subject of utmost importance. If the nation came under foreign domination, the Vietnamese believed that this domination would only be short-lived as long as they maintained a separate culture and a separate language. In the beginning of the 20th century when Vietnam had come under French colonial rule, Nguyen Ba Hoc, a famous scholar, commented prophetically:

"If the Vietnamese language survives, Vietnam will survive."

His words are praised and venerated by every living Vietnamese. Vietnamese culture nevertheless bears a profound imprint of Chinese civilization and culture. Until recently, this influence was most conspicuously reflected in politics, economy, culture, and education. The traditional Vietnamese concepts of nationalism, national organization, public administration, laws and regulations were all patterned after Chinese institutions. Divisions of work, production, commerce, and the Vietnamese writing system, textbook, examination, etc. were either Chinese-introduced or borrowed from the Chinese. Before the introduction of Western culture, Confucius had been regarded by the Vietnamese as a saint and sage whose classics and moral teachings were accepted as intellectual criteria and behavioral rules. Among other things, Confucius professed the theory of "true expression" which says that "it's important to use words with accuracy; if words are not accurate, our expressions will be erroneous and our undertakings will fail." While not intended as a linguistic rule, the Confucian theory of true expression is in essence a philosophy which promotes social order, an order based on society's hierarchy and stratification. Confucian philosophy in many respects does not befit the basic tenets of Communism and represents a major challenge to Communist ideology, especially in backward societies like traditional China and Vietnam. Because of its popularity, however, North Vietnam Communists cunningly avoided attacking it publicly and chose instead to take advantage of it for their own purposes. For example, the war they waged in South Vietnam was called a war of liberation, a war of just cause because it was the Confucian "true expression" of the Vietnamese people's aspirations. For all its merits, Chinese culture made its
impact felt only among the Vietnamese mandarinate and literates who made up the minority elite. The great majority of the populace, however, displayed and fostered its own kind of culture, a culture purely Vietnamese by nature. Throughout the generations, this culture has been expressed, recorded and propagated in the form of simple, short popular literary pieces such as proverbs, folk songs, lyrical poems and ritual chants. The composition of these songs and poems is simple, the language used plain and pleasant. When sung or incanted, their rhythm and tones create gracious and gay music sounds that express the ingenuous but emotional nature of a people who earnestly cling to their own way of life. This national character still exists today, and during the war both sides, North Vietnam and South Vietnam, made conscious efforts to employ these literary forms with a goal to win over, mobilize, and incite the people into working and fighting for a cause each side claimed as right.

Vietnam began to assimilate Western culture when the French occupied it in the middle of the 19th century. With its appealing novelties, the newly introduced Western civilization considerably altered the traditional Vietnamese way of life, which still had maintained ties with Chinese culture.

By 1945, under French colonial design, Vietnam was administratively divided into three separate regions: North, Center and South (Tonkin, Annam and Cochín-China, respectively). Although they speak the same language, the Vietnamese living in different regions have different phonetic pronunciations, several different terms and expressions, and a few highly localized accents. When two Vietnamese from different regions meet for the first time, they are usually conscious of the difference in their speech habits. This creates interesting difficulties but never prevents them from understanding each other. Apart from the Vietnamese, there also exist about two dozen ethnic groups, each of which speaks a different language.

The 1954 Geneva Accords partitioned Vietnam into two regions: North and South. Over 800,000 northerners chose to migrate South while nearly 80,000 southerners were regrouped to the North. As a result, Vietnamese

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4 Latter figure based on Communist documents. RVN official reports estimated the number of southerner regroupees at 100,000.
speech gradually became more unified than ever before. However, with the new demarcation line holding North and South incommunicado, with opposing political regimes, and under different foreign cultural influences, there gradually developed profound differences between North and South Vietnam in terms of culture and language, including military terminology.

**Communist Culture and Language**

In North Vietnam, efforts were made by the Communist regime to eliminate the lingering influence of Chinese classical education and Confucian—Mencian philosophy, which are considered as expressions of a feudalistic and backward heritage still deeply ingrained in Vietnamese culture. Emphasis has equally been placed on the elimination of French cultural influence which has been criticized as an instrument for invasion, and the genesis of a romantic, "petit bourgeois" literature. North Vietnam wanted to find a way toward a new culture consistent with its regime and having the effect of popular attraction. This, the Communists found in a complete return to the age-old popular culture but they had to go through a transitional period. Initially, from 1948 to 1954, North Vietnam seemed to prefer the use of classical Chinese vocabulary even in daily conversation. The language used by Communist political cadre sounded especially pedantic and conceited, burdened as it was by formal, archaic expressions that were no longer of popular usage. It was the period during which Communist Chinese were taking over mainland China. Their complete victory in 1949 spurred the North Vietnamese political cadre into a passionate study of Red Chinese revolutionary methods, from theory to practice. It was also the period during which North Vietnamese cadre were sent to China for training. Chinese training materials were subsequently translated into Vietnamese. The use of classical Chinese vocabulary became therefore widespread and fashionable. Political slogans during this period used a mixture of Vietnamese and classical Chinese terms, such as "Solidarity, Solidarity, greater Solidarity."
Ho Chi Minh himself usually quoted Chinese classics. His favorite phrase was "Progress must be made each day, every day, again and again."\(^5\)

After North Vietnam became a separate nation above the 17th parallel in 1954 and after the first Indochina war had ended, it made a deliberate effort to build and restructure the Vietnamese culture and language after its political outlook. The first visible change was the disappearance of classical Chinese in language and terminology. More emphasis was placed on the use of simple, plain Vietnamese language with a view to make it easy to understand and memorize by the populace. For example, "truc thang" (helicopter), a term borrowed from classical Chinese, is now called "may bay len thang" (aircraft which rises vertically); "thuy quan luc chien" (Marines), also a term of Chinese origin, is called "linh thuy danh bo" (naval troops fighting on land). Several other terms, mostly military, went through the same transformation. Foreign geographical names which had heretofore been transcribed into Vietnamese through Chinese pronunciation and accepted in daily usage were discarded in favor of direct transliteration. Thus, "Hoa Thinh Don" (Washington), becomes "Oa-Sinh-Ton"; "Mac Tu Khoa" (Moscow) becomes "Mot-cu", etc. Another new feature of North Vietnamese Communist language was the enrichment of Vietnamese vocabulary by compounding common words. This compounding process is similar to the Communist technique of devising abbreviations. It can be understood only by those Vietnamese familiar with their usage. A common word like "ba" (three) for example, can be the root for over one hundred compounds, such as "ba cung" (three together), "ba khoan" (three postponements), "ba mat" (three aspects), etc.; the list is inexhaustible.\(^6\)

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\(^5\)Translation of the original Chinese phrase "Nhat Tan, Nhat Nhat Tan, Huu Nhat Tan".

\(^6\)Each compound in fact expresses a political slogan or policy in abbreviated form. "Ba Cung" (Three Together) stands for "Cung An, Cung O, Cung Lam" (Eat Together, Live Together, Work Together). "Ba Khoan" (Three Postponements) stands for "Khoan Yeu, Khoan Cuoi, Khoan De" (Postpone Love, Postpone Marriage, Postpone Babies). "Ba Mat" (Three Aspects or Efforts) stands for "Binh Van, Quan Su, Chinh Tri" (Enemy Troop Proselyting, Military Effort, Political Effort).
In their efforts to broaden a popular culture and language, the North Vietnamese Communists fully exploited the merits of traditionally popular literature such as plainness, simplicity, flexibility, lyricality, and images. Careful studies of rules governing the composition of folk songs, lyrical poems and ritual chants helped sharpen the Communist propaganda technique to the point that every piece of propaganda became easily accepted and widely propagated among the populace. This was the reason why the Communists were so successful in the areas of information and propaganda. Every emulation campaign, every official holiday, every economic or military campaign were accompanied by psychological actions. To stimulate production, for example, the Communists advanced the slogan "Each Person Works Like Two." During the period of the 1972 Summer offensive, the slogan used was "Let's Make Each Day Count As Twenty Years." Ho Chi Minh himself was fully cognizant of the important role played by popular literature and poetry in the war effort. When North Vietnam was preparing to launch its general offensive against cities in South Vietnam during the Tet holidays of 1968, it gave the order for preparation and attack under the form of a "Happy Tet" poem by Ho Chi Minh. This poem was broadcast by Radio Hanoi, intended for Communist troops in the South:

This Spring will be much different from previous springs
Because every household will enjoy news of victory
North and South will now forever reunite
Forward! Total victory will be ours.  

This was Ho's second "Happy Tet" poem ever published. The first one dated back in 1945 when the Viet Minh took over governmental power in Vietnam. The Vietnamese text of the 1968 poem reads:

Xuan nay khac han may Xuan qua
Thang loi tin vui khap moi nha
Nam, Bac tu nay xum hop mai
Tien len, thang loi se ve ta.

In Vietnamese, Xuan(Spring) also connotes Tet.
Despite its effort to gain independence in culture and language, North Vietnam was heavily influenced by modern Chinese martial music. Most musical songs were composed for choral, not personal presentation. This was perhaps a deliberate Communist effort aimed at stimulating collective activities and work which were deemed more vital to socialism than individual entertainment. As a result, North Vietnamese Communist-style music, although given equal emphasis as other branches of art, did not serve well its propaganda purpose. Many captured NVA soldiers disclosed, however, that they usually furtively tuned in to South Vietnamese radio broadcasts for the simple reason that they wanted to listen to music, the kind of languorous and romanticized music to which human nature feels closer.

Aside from music, North Vietnam also took interest in drama and painting. But as was the case with other arts, drama and painting were also devoted to the objective of promoting Communism and the war of liberation.

In general, over the years of partition, North Vietnam created a culture and a language that specifically befitted its own world and were committed to the service of its own goal. The cultural and linguistic gap between North and South Vietnam gradually widened to the point of transforming them into quasi-foreign countries. The North Vietnamese press once carried a story about a South Vietnamese spy operating in the north being apprehended on a bus. A companion traveller detected oddities in his language which sounded strange to the North Vietnamese and reported the fact to the security police. Without being conscious about it, our operator had given himself away, just by speaking his own language, being himself a native of North Vietnam.

To North Vietnam, the Paris Agreement of 29 January 1973 came into being as an immediate victory in psychological warfare. For one thing, the kind of language written in it was specifically North Vietnamese. This fact could be detected by every Vietnamese. As a matter of fact, North Vietnamese language had become quite an obstacle for the allied effort of intelligence collection. The task of analyzing it was particularly painful for it was not always easy to understand the true semantical meaning of the information collected. To facilitate intelligence analysis, effort was made by South Vietnamese military intelligence.
to publish a lexicon of North Vietnamese terminology whose third edition in 1973 contained twice as much content as the previous edition of 1968 and five times as much as the first edition in 1961.

The language used by North Vietnam is indeed a language of its own. Its phraseology is also radically different from traditional Vietnamese, influenced as it has been by propaganda technique. The most remarkable feature is repetition. The same idea can be repeated many times in a text; it is presumably intended to be ingrained in the reader's subconsciousness by its repetition. Every year, the leaders of North Vietnam write articles and essays assessing North Vietnamese conduct of the military effort. The same ideas are again and again presented every year in these articles. Only through inquisitive reading and analysis can the reader detect anything novel, but something novel almost invariably is indicative of a significant change. This is because Communists are usually very cautious in expressing themselves and only competent leaders can advance new ideas. In December 1974, for example, North Vietnam's Premier Pham Van Dong declared that during 1975 the South Vietnamese people would witness many events of particular significance. This was immediately interpreted by our intelligence analysts as indicative of a new North Vietnamese military effort during the year.

South Vietnamese Culture and Language

Vietnamese culture and language went through significant transformation in South Vietnam as well as in North Vietnam. As of 1954, the growing American involvement in South Vietnam brought about some cultural influence that outshone and eventually overshadowed the impact of Chinese and French culture. South Vietnamese culture during this period was an amalgamation of traditional and modern tendencies, particularly under the influence of the interplay between modern tendencies and traditional values. Its resulting characteristics were a certain libertarianism verging on permissiveness and a predilection for change.

It was on the cultural front that one could see a real conflict take place, a conflict that diametrically opposed North against South in terms of cultural outlook. Nowhere else did this conflict manifest itself in a
more representative way than in music. In South Vietnam, music blossomed in total freedom and diversity, inclined toward romanticism and languorous lyricism. War was also an important subject for musical composition, but more often than not it was represented as a cause for separation and sorrowful laments. Only very rarely was it made the subject of epic music intended to foster heroism and gallantry. There were indeed such works but they were all produced by governmental propaganda and information agencies or the RVNAF psychological warfare department. Thus, in music, all liberties were permitted, even anti-war songs. The line was drawn only at making propaganda for promoting Communism. Strange as it may have seemed, the proliferation of anti-war songs lamenting the sorrows of war occurred at about the same time as the progress of the Communist general offensive campaign in 1968. Simple coincidence or deliberateness, the fashionable anti-war songs were certainly detrimental to the cause of the RVN war effort.

Such permissive libertarianism led to the free introduction of Chinese-style knight-errantry novels from Hong Kong, particularly those written by Kim Dung (Chin Yun). These were serialized in leading newspapers and passionately read by the public. The impact of these outlandish, mythical stories on the lives of the populace and the war in South Vietnam was far-reaching. Several main characters of these stories were so idolized that their thoughts and actions were imitated in daily life. Some people, including a few Vietnamese national leaders, even went as far as calling themselves by nicknames or pseudonyms taken at least in part if not in full from the names of the most famous characters. This fashion for imitating the feats and personalities of knight-errant stories could be found in many instances, for example, in the conference room of the Two-Party Joint Military Commission. A leading character in this series of novels is Lenh Ho Xung. When engaging an adversary in a fight, he uses his own martial style, an unorthodox style which cannot be found in any regular martial textbook and consists of quick-changing variations, and always wins. The RVN military delegation at the JMC applied the same self-styled flexible approach in negotiations which was not based on any official
directive or procedure. Its members, as a matter of fact, deliberately contradicted each other when addressing the conference and sometimes talked pure nonsense, just for the fun of confusing their monolithic adversaries. The Communists were greatly surprised and became confused, not knowing exactly what points the other side wanted to make, where the other side's major interest lay, or how the other side proposed to solve a certain problem. But the Communists, too, took advantage of this popular passion for knight-errant novels which were on display and sale almost everywhere. They found the proliferation of these novels an excellent modality to quietly push their propaganda materials by substituting them for the contents, leaving the covers and the first few pages as intact and as appealing as they were.

This widely popular attraction resulted in a competition between newspapers to carry more and more of those stories in serialized form. As a matter of fact, the newspaper with the largest circulation during this period was always one that carried the newest and longest installment of the most appealing knight-errantry story to-date. Another device used by newspapers to achieve wide circulation was a special column devoted to rumors. The stories or anecdotes contained in this column were mostly about current news which might be true or fabricated or a mixture of both, but they were always sensational and mystifying and invariably became subjects of speculation and conjecture.\(^8\) Unknowingly, however, it was those stories that created suspicions and gave rise to rumors to which the South Vietnamese populace were particularly sensitive.

In general, there was an effort to return to the traditional Vietnamese culture in South Vietnam as well as in North Vietnam. It was correctly

\(^8\)This refers to the column "Ao Tha Vit" (The Duck-Pond) carried by the "Song" (Live) daily newspaper whose publisher and editor was Chu Tu, a satirist, now deceased. The Vietnamese word "vit" (duck) derives its figurative meaning of "false report" from the French word "canard" from which it is directly translated. Many newspapers later carried a similar column.
surmised by most South Vietnamese intellectuals that the only way to achieve national independence and true identity was through the reinstatement of time-honored traditions and values which had been eroded or debased by war and disorder. Several cultural conventions were held during which it was agreed that contemporary Vietnamese culture should be oriented toward "science, people, and mass." By and large, this effort existed only in form and nothing substantial was achieved over the years. As a result, South Vietnamese culture continued to flourish in libertarianism and even in absurdity.

In contrast to North Vietnam which generally forbids every form of superstition, South Vietnam condoned it. Fortune tellers, astrologers, and mediums conducted a thriving business and their numerous clients included more than a few high-ranking officials. This belief in the supernatural seemed to indicate a certain feeling of insecurity among the populace. There were stories that some field commanders even consulted astrologers for the most appropriate date and time to launch an operation or to go on a combat inspection tour. While North Vietnamese society quietly subsisted along the lines prescribed by the Communist Party, South Vietnamese society was frequently turned upside down by political upheavals and economic misfortunes. This was perhaps the reason why people in South Vietnam were more inclined to search into the supernatural for their own destiny.

Religions in South Vietnam exerted a particularly important influence on politics. Apart from Buddhism and Roman Catholicism which have been established throughout Vietnam, Caodaism and Hoa Hao Buddhism are the two sects that came into being only at the turn of the century, and their influence is limited to the Mekong Delta. Cao Dai and Hoa Hao followers were persistently anti-Communist throughout the war. Their holy lands, located in Tay Ninh and An Giang provinces were bulwarks of resistance against Communist infiltration and attacks. In general, Roman Catholicism always exerted some influence on leading personalities and the elite while Buddhism was the religion of the popular majority. It was the Buddhist struggle movement in 1963 that led up to the overthrow of the First Republic government. Because of the popularity of religion, the Communists
always sought to exploit it by using a religious screen for their underground activities or by utilizing the spiritual power of religious leaders as a means to penetrate governmental ranks. Communist agents usually enjoyed relative immunity under the cover of religion. In the aftermath of the Buddhist uprising in 1963, security forces and the national police in particular were especially chary about meddling into religious affairs, and generally chose to stay away from anything related to religion.

Linguistically, the Vietnamese language as it was spoken and written in South Vietnam became more and more enriched and innovative as a result of contributions made by Western culture. The introduction of American sub-cultural expressions and beliefs, displayed by the "flower children" generation, came to affect Vietnamese young people in particular and gave rise to much sophisticated slang which were subsequently accepted as common usage. In mid-1967, for example, "suc may", meaning "no way", became very popular slang. This apparently harmless expression enjoyed widest acceptance among carefree youths because it connoted playfulness, indolence, and a certain defiance. It was the period of improved security, stabilized politics, and economic prosperity made possible by the presence of US combat troops. Everybody seemed to enjoy the new situation and it was as if the prospect of a bright future was just around the corner. People were carefree and became incredulous of anything that sounded like danger or misfortune, hence the increased popularity of the slang "no way" which was meant to express disagreement or disbelief. In time, the slang became so ingrained into subconsciousness that people were seldom aware of its intended meaning because it was used indiscriminately for almost everything. Unfortunately, the same expression was also used indifferently by intelligence officers when they discussed the validity of certain indicators pointing toward an enemy general offensive in early 1968. Of course, they all thought there was "no way" the enemy would be able to launch such an offensive. That was their first reaction when confronted by hard intelligence, and the slang expression did its job splendidly.
Over the years, the culture and language of North and South Vietnamese became separate entities and the gap kept widening. Knowledge about South Vietnam does not necessarily imply the same kind of knowledge about North Vietnam. This is important because people tend to see things through their own perspective and interpret facts according to their own experience. This is a pitfall that was common among the majority of Americans in South Vietnam. Most of them were not aware of the cultural and linguistic difference, and kept inferring their knowledge about North Vietnam from what they knew about the South.

Another major obstacle that seriously hampered the American effort to collect data on the enemy was the fact that these data had to go through the distorting lens of translation. If one is to believe the wisdom of the axiom "translating is betraying," then one can always expect a certain amount of distortion at best. There were of course some Americans who had a complete command of the Vietnamese language and in fact spoke it as well as a native, or even better in terms of metaphors and proverbs, but they were a tiny minority. In addition, intelligence as it was practiced in South Vietnam had a special jargon and a methodology of its own that outsiders could hardly understand. The widely admitted reasoning was that not all Vietnamese who were proficient in general English could become good interpreters or translators in intelligence, for aside from a good command of intelligence terminology in both languages, they were also required to have a thorough familiarity with the kind of language used by the Communists. Not very many had this double knowledge. The English language, for example, includes the term "general uprising" which is used to translate the Communist term "Tong Noi Day" (general uprising, literally). But it was found that the same English term was used, indiscriminately, for two other Communist forms of general uprising, "dong khoi" (uprising in unison, literally), and "Tong Khoi Nghia" (general uprising for a cause, literally). As a matter of fact, each of these terms has special connotations that are difficult to include into
a ready-made, concise English term. Each of them was also used by the Communists in a discriminating manner for each connoted a certain historical time frame. "Tong Khoi Nghia", for example, referred to the revolution of August 1945, in which the people, at the instigation of the Viet Minh, participated in the seizure of governmental power. In 1968, the Communists called their offensive campaign "Tong Tan Cong, Tong Khoi Nghia" (general offensive, general uprising — for a cause), because they conceived it as a repeat of the August Revolution of 1945, and expected the same kind of popular participation throughout the country. An "Dong Khoi" (uprising in unison) was a term intended only for natives of South Vietnam to incite them to rise up against local governments, an allegorical reminiscence of the first Communist revolt in Kien Hoa province in 1960. Both of these terms referred to specific historical events and if they had been used repetitively, their meanings and psychological impact would have certainly become lost. As a result, in 1972 and again in 1975, the Communists chose a different term, "Tong Noi Day" (general uprising) to replace the previous ones which had apparently become anachronistic. General uprising, as an English term, renders quite adequately the literal meaning of each of these events but for a deeper and more accurate assessment of the event itself, it was not enough for the inquisitive intelligence analyst.

Much has been said about another critical pitfall that occurred during the translation of the Paris Agreement text. The Agreement, which was drafted some time in October 1973, originally intended the National Council of Reconciliation and Concord to be just an administrative body. That was what had been agreed upon by the negotiators. But "administration" when rendered in Vietnamese, can have two meanings and equivalents; one is "chinh quyen" (government) and the other is "hanh chanh" (administration body). The North Vietnamese, by their deliberate choice, opted for the Vietnamese term which means government, and by doing this in all apparent innocence transformed the Council into a form of coalition government. This wickedness was finally detected by a comparison of both English and Vietnamese texts.
In intelligence as well as in certain other fields, the text of a document does not always reflect the true intent of the writer. Sometimes it is necessary also to read between the lines. This is particularly important in intelligence analysis. As far as Communist documents are concerned, the inveterate analyst can always detect something hidden behind the literal meaning of the text. Some call this special ability the sixth sense, or intuition, which is an invaluable asset of the talented analyst. But if the text is translated into another language, this hidden or implied meaning will be difficult to detect, if not entirely lost. Apart from translation, which can be acceptable for intelligence purposes if professionally done, special attention must be given to instantaneous interpreting of speech. In general, our disposition toward interpreting tends to be more tolerant, and bilingual interpreters are not required to meet exacting qualifications. The need for interpreters in South Vietnam became vital when US combat troops were introduced, and it kept growing. Attempts were made to meet this urgent requirement by recruiting civilians with some English knowledge into military service. These interpreters proved to be useful for general work, but their proficiency in English was rather poor and unsuited for specialized work. Humans, being human, never want to expose their weaknesses and deficiencies. The same is true with interpreters who, even though they sometimes don't quite understand what is being said, always try to render it by ad-libbing or inventing things which may be far from the truth. This is one of the pitfalls that plagued the combined intelligence effort in South Vietnam at first. Later, reliance on interpreters was greatly reduced as direct communication between American and Vietnamese counterparts increased and as combined working became an established procedure. The possibility of misunderstanding still remained, but it was more a matter of degree.

Apart from difficulties created by the language barrier, the American intelligence collection effort was also apt to run into some obstacles due to inadequate understanding of Vietnamese psychological customs and manners, especially those found in local communities. In the Central Highlands of MR-2 for example, there exist many ethnic Montagnard tribes.
whose matriarchal social organization gives ruling power to the women. Any contact made with male members of the tribe inevitably brings about little result. In the Mekong Delta, particularly in the Ca Mau area many people made a living by producing charcoal. They built earthen furnaces in open fields to burn trees and these were registered on infra-red tapes as thermal spots that initially American specialists were unable to interpret correctly. This was of course an instance of unfamiliarity with local customs. In imagery interpretation also, several American specialists at first mistook certain isolated tombs scattered among rice fields as crew-served weapon positions because on aerial photos, the configuration of their structures looked almost the same.

Knowledge about traditional Vietnamese architecture can be helpful in intelligence work in case orientation must be ascertained. As a rule, most pagodas face the southwest, a market place front always faces north and a tomb generally lies with its head toward the west. National character also varies by region or by ethnic group. Vietnamese living in the delta, for example, are generally shrewd and cunning while Montagnards are ingenuous; southerners are sincere but short-tempered; northerners are usually tactful and subtle, and most people living in central Vietnam are incisive and ceremonious. Thorough knowledge about a nation is not always easy to learn since there are many regional peculiarities that confuse even local people. The most important feature of the Vietnam war is that it was a conflict between North Vietnam and South Vietnam, hence a civil war in some of its aspects. What people usually failed to recognize or took rather lightly was the deep-seated cultural and linguistic difference between the warring adversaries, and this was precisely what caused so many failures and setbacks. A Communist plan of attack which was coordinated with actions by traitors within our ranks was defeated simply because of the difference in launching time. The Communist planners apparently failed to realize that their own official time, aligned on Hanoi time, was one hour later than Saigon time. When the traitors started firing one hour too soon, they

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9In some tribes, such as the Bahnar and the Jarai, although a woman is usually the "decision-maker" in the family, she has to seek advice from her older brother for important decisions.
exposed themselves and were all arrested. The attack from the outside never materialized because of this initial setback. Another case of failure occurred when a Communist cadre was arrested while visiting his family who lived in a government-controlled rural area. To neighbors who dropped in to see him, he was introduced by his parents as a city-dwelling visitor. While they were chatting a jet fighter happened to fly by at low altitude and creating supersonic booms. Through conditioned reflex the Communist cadre sought cover by crawling under the bed. This took everybody present aback. He had unknowingly given himself away simply by failing to adapt to a new cultural environment.

When they chose the Tet holidays to launch their 1968 general offensive campaign, the Communists were primarily interested in its surprise and totally disregarded its adverse psychological effect. This was understandable because to North Vietnam Tet was merely a custom that needed to be changed because it was both the manifestation of a feudalistic heritage and an occasion for wasteful, luxurious spending. Accordingly, the traditional importance of Tet in North Vietnam was downplayed by Communist authorities. But to South Vietnam, which revered traditions, Tet was as sacred as always because people regarded Tet less as a celebration than a spiritual tie between man and the universe, between the living and the dead, and also between the living people themselves. As a result, the South Vietnamese troops were angrily determined to eliminate the violators of sacred Tet and in the aftermath of the offensive, recruiting was never so successful.

South Vietnam's basic weakness in the war was taking too lightly the enemy's will to carry out his plans. We tended to liken our adversaries to ourselves and assess them according to our subjective thinking. For example, if a Communist plan was disclosed, we usually believed that our enemy would discard it since we always considered everything that had been leaked as too risky. But to the Communists, it was not always so because their goal always outweighed the risks to be incurred, and if the political requirement so dictated, a plan once worked out was usually implemented regardless of the risks caused by disclosure.
In the history of intelligence, there is an abundance of examples of successes in very difficult intelligence and counterintelligence operations. The key to these successes almost always is special attention to minute details. Besides, planners usually consider that any operational scheme is prone to omissions and leaks and accordingly they take extra precautions through contingency planning. In the Vietnam War, such fundamentals were observed in principle but detail was something that usually escaped the planner's mind. The usual contention was that culture, language, customs, manners, and traditions never really constituted true obstacles because both sides were Vietnamese. To intelligence personnel, however, these are precisely the factors of considerable importance that could spell the difference between success and failure.
CHAPTER III

Republic of Vietnam and United States Intelligence Organizations in South Vietnam

The RVN National and Local Intelligence Coordination Committees

Robert Thompson, a Vietnam specialist, wrote that in 1966, in Saigon, he had been able to identify seventeen different United States and Republic of Vietnam intelligence agencies. He did not name them. However, if we were to take into account all intelligence agencies in the entire Republic, Vietnamese agencies alone actually exceeded this number but fluctuated with time. As of 1965, on the civilian side, there were at one time or another:

1. The Central Intelligence Office (CIO);
2. The National Police (NP);
3. The Directorate of North Vietnamese Affairs of the Office of the Chairman, Central Executive Committee;
4. The Intelligence Directorate of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs;
5. The Directorate General of Administrative Security;
6. The Rural Development (RD) cadre group;
7. The Civil Affairs cadre group;
8. Armed propaganda teams of the "Chieu Hoi" (Open Arms) Ministry;

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1 Sir Robert Thompson, Phoenix, Myths and Relevances of the Vietnam War, (Lugano Review LR 4) James (Paddy) Fitzsimmons, April 1975, p.61.

2 This organization existed only in name, not in substance.
9. Census and grievance teams.

Military intelligence agencies included the following:

1. The Military Security Directorate (better known as MSS);
2. J-7 of the Joint General Staff (J-7, JGS);
3. The Strategic Technical Directorate (STRATDAT);
4. The Liaison Service;
5. The Research and Documentation Office of the National Defense Ministry;
6. G-2, Special Forces;
7. The Intelligence Directorate of the General Political Warfare Department;
8. J-2, JGS, and subordinate service intelligence staff and units such as A-2 of the Vietnam Air Force (A2/VNAF); N-2 of the Vietnam Navy (VNN); Special Collection Detachment/VNAF; Special Collection Detachment/VNN (Unit 701); G-2's of Army corps, infantry divisions and general reserve divisions; corps and division military intelligence detachments; division long-range reconnaissance companies; S2's of sectors and subsectors with their respective intelligence/security platoons and squads; and the 924th Support Group, J-2, JGS (later renamed Unit 101).

There were also two kinds of Vietnamese intelligence units which came under direct US operational control: the Provincial Reconnaissance Units (PRU) and the Kit Carson Scouts (units made up of Communist defectors).³

Though some of the intelligence organizations were later disbanded (North Vietnamese Affairs Directorate, civil affairs cadre, G-2/Special Forces), or merged (the Liaison Service became subordinated to STRATDAT) or disappeared with the withdrawal of US forces (Kit Carson Scouts), there remained a significant number of them.

As an effort to give intelligence a more unified structure, the Social and Political Research Department was established during the First

³The PRU's were initially created and controlled by CORDS, US Embassy. As of 31 March 1969, they were transferred to the National Police. Each PRU operated under the control of the province chief.
Republic as an agency of the President's Office. It was chartered to control both civilian and military intelligence activities, but its authority was limited to the CIO, NP, MSS and J-2, JGS.

The Social and Political Research Department was disbanded after the 1 November 1963 revolution and the CIO took over control of intelligence organizations in the country. To ensure smooth coordination of operations, a standing committee was established which included representatives of all the agencies involved.

In 1966 the cabinet was augmented with a new department known as the Security Ministry and the Security Minister subsequently took on the additional position of Director, CIO, to control intelligence operations in the country.

Later, the Security Ministry was disbanded, but the CIO remained the highest intelligence agency in the country. Considerations were given to making the Defense Minister or the Interior Minister concurrently Director, CIO, which would shift authority from the President's Office to the cabinet. However, in the end a National Intelligence Coordination Committee (NICC) was established and chaired by the Presidential Assistant for Military and Intelligence Affairs. (Chart 1) The office of the chairman of the National Intelligence Coordination Committee was not staffed by representatives of member agencies. Its personnel came from the CIO whose director became secretary general of the NICC. Members of the NICC included the NP, MSS, J-7, JGS, J-2, JGS, and STRATDAT, but the latter was not considered to be a permanent member.

Chart 1 — Organization, National Intelligence Coordination Committee

- Chairman, NICC
- Secretary General Director, Central Intelligence Office
- CIO
- National Police
- Military Security Service
- J-7, Joint General Staff
- J-2, Joint General Staff
- Strategic Technical Directorate
The NICC was supposed to meet once a month. In reality, it met only when needed, once every three to six months, with all member agencies represented. In addition to these meetings, the Chairman's Office worked directly with the CIO, NP, or MSS. Member agencies had to provide the Chairman's Office with copies of all intelligence reports or summaries distributed. Information was extracted from these materials and presented as NICC reports to the President's Office and occasionally to the Premier's Office.

This procedure shows that the NICC Chairman's Office wanted to keep up with intelligence information, both civilian and military, down to the tactical level, when it should have concentrated solely on matters of national concern. This excess led to its being swamped with reports from the member agencies, making evaluation impossible and negating timeliness.

Throughout the years of its existence, the NICC failed to perform its role properly as required. It was unable to establish national intelligence plans and requirements; nor was it capable of arriving at a strategically comprehensive assessment of the military and political situation that the GVN required to face eventualities with confidence.

In addition to the NICC, there were intelligence coordination committees at military region level, but those were established according to the region commanders' individual concepts. They usually included a representative of the region commander (deputy commander or chief of staff) as chairman; the G-2 of the Military Region (G-2, MR) as secretary general; and the chief of the regional MSS and his counterpart at the NP, both serving as members of the committee.

There are no representatives of the CIO, J-7, or STRATDAT on the regional committees. These regional committees did not meet periodically. Their primary purpose was to ensure effective and timely exchange of information which otherwise would have been more difficult, given intelligence agencies' tendency to disregard lateral dissemination for the benefit of their own headquarters. While at military region level, the organization of an intelligence coordination committee was somewhat
optional, such organizations at sector and sub-sector levels were mandated by government decrees, beginning in 1964 with a Premier's decree establishing provincial intelligence coordination committees, followed by later directives concerning district intelligence coordination committees. At provincial level, the province chief/sector commander was chairman of the intelligence coordination committee, the sector S-2 was its secretary general; the chief of MSS and his counterpart at the NP were permanent members of the committee. Non-permanent committee members included representatives of the CIO; Unit 101; the Chief, "Chieu Hoi" Service; Chief, Information Service; intelligence officers of US units stationed in the area; US advisors to sector S-2, etc. At district level, the district chief/sub-sector commander was the chairman and the sub-sector S-2 was the secretary general. Committee members included the chiefs of MSS, NP, "Chieu Hoi" and Information sub-services, and representatives of rural development and civil affairs cadre groups.

In addition to providing the mechanics for coordination and exchange of information, the intelligence coordination committee acted as a source control center where agents' reports were screened for validity. At this center, agents' files were maintained in a standardized format that provided for distinctive sections dealing with personal data, collection qualifications, and area of operation, respectively. When there were grounds for suspecting a certain agent, collection agencies compared various parts of the agent's biography and, upon preliminary verification, proceeded toward a complete exchange of biographical information. Upon identifying a fabricator or a contaminated agent, the agency concerned took appropriate action and notified all other collection agencies.

Still another purpose of the coordination committee was to ensure that sources who were available to one member agency, but whose knowledgeable or access was not consistent with the line of priorities handled by that one agency, would be directed to the appropriate agencies or organizations. Members of the Viet Cong Infrastructure (VCI) were the responsibility of the NP, military proselyting cadre were handled by MSS, and military prisoners of war were processed by military
intelligence. This operational procedure was designed to provide clear-cut division of responsibilities and delimitation of each organization's collection scope, with no one duplicating the efforts of another, and with each organization having its own distinct targets.

Nevertheless, in 1967 it was realized for the first time that intelligence in Vietnam focused solely on enemy military forces and ignored a no less important force, the Communist political force, also known as Viet Cong Infrastructure (VCI). As a result, a new effort was initiated on a national scale to root out the VCI and the NP was allowed to expand in order to cope with this extensive task.

The need for a concerted intelligence effort led to the establishment of the Phoenix Program in 1968 (Decree 280a/TT/SL, 1 July 1968). This program, originally being an American idea endorsed by the GVN, was administered through existing Provincial and District Intelligence and Operations Coordination Committees (PIOCC and DIOCC respectively). The organizational structure of these committees is shown in Charts 2 and 3. The Phoenix Program sought further coordination than was effected at the old intelligence coordination committees. It provided for coordination between intelligence and tactical operations with the aim of permitting immediate tactical response that would lead to destruction of the VCI.

Many government officials felt that this program, though upgraded to a national policy and enjoying total US support from its inception to cease-fire day, did not live up to expectations. In organization the program's shortcoming was that, while theoretically the concept of entrusting eradication of the VCI to police forces was sound, in reality police personnel in charge of the program at provincial and district levels did not have the qualifications, prestige or experience for such an assignment. Chiefs of NP services and sub-services were all fresh out of training. They were second lieutenants at provincial level and noncommissioned officers at district level while their counterparts in military intelligence or military security were captains or first lieutenants at provincial level and warrant officers or second lieutenants at district level. The military officers were also better qualified and more experienced than their police counterparts.