INTRODUCTION

The Lao Dong Party
North Vietnamese Policy, 1954-1959
Political Tactics Fail
1959: The Decision for War
The Political Front
The Military Front: Infiltration Routes
Providing the Leadership Core
1961: The American Response

THE DECISION TO COMMIT THE NORTH VIETNAMESE ARMY

The Liberation Army
Control of the Liberation Front
Leadership of the Front
The People's Revolutionary Party
1963-64: The Decision to Escalate
Infiltration by Regiment
Multi-regimental Campaign of Maneuver
1965: The American Response
THE DECISION TO NEGOTIATE FOR PEACE

Explaining the Northern Presence
Dependence on Northern Manpower
Dependence on Northern Supply
The Central Office for South Viet-Nam
Regional and Local Party Organization
Control by Northern Personnel
Defining the Strategy

The Decision to Negotiate

TABLES (list), FOOTNOTES.
THE DECISION TO BEGIN THE WAR

In early January, 1966, on a sweep called "Operation CRIMP," allied forces in South Viet-Nam overran an important Viet Cong headquarters in Binh Duong Province, northwest of Saigon. Among the enemy papers captured, by elements of the U.S. 1st Infantry Division, was a notebook containing a 23,000-word review of the "Experiences of the South Viet-Nam Revolutionary Movement during the Past Several Years." It was written about 1963 by an unidentified Communist cadre, evidently for the instruction of other Communists in their party's policy, and covers the period from the end of the war against the French, in 1954, to that time.

The landmark fact of this nine-year period, according to this document, was a far-reaching policy decision taken by the Party's Second Central Committee at its Fifteenth Conference in early 1959. "After the Resolution of the Fifteenth Conference of the Central Committee was issued, all of South Viet-Nam possessed a clear and correct strategic policy and orientation," the writer observes. "The Resolution of the Fifteenth Conference of the Central Committee ... clearly spelled out the revolutionary task in South Viet-Nam and at the same time outlined the path which the South Viet-Nam
revolution should take... the setting forth of the basic responsibilities of the South Viet-Nam revolution was a basic victory of our Party and created the basis for many succeeding victories. If there had been no Resolution of the Fifteenth Conference of the Central Committee then there certainly would never be a victorious revolutionary movement in South Viet-Nam as exists today."

The character of the path which had thus been chosen was made explicit by the immediate result:

"The directive of the Politburo in May 1959 stated that the time had come to push the armed struggle against the enemy. Thanks to this... in October 1959 the armed struggle was launched." (1)

The Lao Dong Party

The party organs referred to in the CRIMP notebook are those of the Lao Dong, or Vietnamese Worker's Party, as the Communist Party of Viet-Nam has been called since 1951. In 1959, as before and since, it was a single party throughout Viet-Nam, with a unified central command headquartered in the North, where its main strength lay. First formed in 1930 as the Indochina Communist Party (ICP), it then included sections
Although there were formally in Laos and Cambodia as well as Viet-Nam, and still is a
removal from Lao Dong control in 1951, Hanoi has maintained
force in those countries,
no close advisory relationship with these parties which still are a
In 1945, because its overt Communist character was a
handicap in forming a broad front against the French, the
Communists announced that the ICP had been dissolved and
established an Association of Marxist Studies as its overt
successor. In fact, however, the Party continued to operate
covertly, and by its own claim, it had organized, led and
controlled the Viet-Minh - the nationalist "Independence
league" - in all regions of the country during the revolt
against French rule. (2) Truong Chinh, the party's secretary-
general at the time, tells how the "Communist Party organized
the different strata of people into the national liberation
front, the Viet Minh," and developed the "peasant organiza-
tions" to give it a "solid base." (2B) An official Lao Dong
Party history notes that a conference of the "south section"
was convened "by order of the Party" on November 20, 1945,
shortly after the party supposedly had dissolved, for the
purpose of "unifying the resistance leadership" in the South
five days later, on November 25, the "Central Party gave the
order for the resistance war." (2C)
Party documents captured by French forces during that war describe the Communist organization of the period. (3) In the South, the apparatus was broadly divided between two regions, or "interzones," and a special zone in the area of Saigon, each reporting directly to the party headquarters in Hanoi. Interzone 5 (Trungbo) encompassed south central Viet-Nam, and Interzone Nambo the south and southwest, including the delta. Province, district, town and village cells reported to them. In 1951, when the party was reconstituted as the Lao Dong, its machinery in the South was reorganized under a six-man Trung Dong Co Viet Nam Hang, or Central Office for South Viet-Nam (COSVN). (3B) Head of COSVN and senior party representative in the South was Le Duan, an Annamite who is now First Secretary of the party in Hanoi. His deputy was Le Duc Tho, a northerner who also is today a member of the Politburo in Hanoi, as well as head of the powerful Organization Department of the party Central Committee. Le Duan and Tho had considerable independence of action in directing day-to-day military and political operations in the South, but remained answerable on broader policy questions to the central party heads in the North. (4)....

The end of the war against France in 1954 and the establishment of separate Vietnamese regimes in North and South brought no significant change in the centralized control of the party from North Viet-Nam. (5) Although COSVN was phased out, its functions in the southern and southwestern provinces were assumed by the Regional Committee for Nambo, while Hanoi took direct charge of party activities in Interzone 5, in the northern part of South Viet-Nam. (5A) Nor did the war's end bring a change in the party's goal, so far as the still "unliberated" South was concerned. The party apparatus in South Vietnam...
concerned. This continued to be the unification of the country under the Communist northern administration. The North Vietnamese delegation leader, Deputy Premier Pham Van Dong, stated this expressly at the closing session of the Geneva Conference on July 21, 1954: "We shall achieve unity. We shall achieve it just as we have won the war. No force in the world, internal or external, can make us deviate from our path..." Ho Chi Minh emphasized this determination the next day by calling publicly for a "long and arduous struggle" to win the southern areas, which are "all our land."

The new circumstances, however, compelled the party to adopt new tactics. In the South, it went underground. In the words of the CRIMP document, "The party apparatus in South Viet-Nam...became covert. The organization and methods of operation of the party were changed in order to guarantee the leadership and focus forces of the party under the new struggle conditions." A party policy paper of the time defines as part of "the immediate mission of Nambo" (its principal zone in South Viet-Nam) "the consolidation and reformation of Party organisms and popular groups on a clandestine basis, based upon vigilance and revolutionary procedures designed to safeguard our forces..." (SB)

At the same time, party groups in legal and semi-legal organizations were to be developed to popular action aimed at hindering the establishment of control by the Saigon government and at preparing for victory in the promised general elections. Alleged "Belligerent" actions, such as assassination and military operations, were prescribed in part on the grounds that they would invite retaliation and possible destruction of the party organ. (SB)
A party policy paper of the time, circulated to party members in the South, declared that "the peace is concluded to procure advantages for us, not for the purpose of ceasing the struggle" and warned that "we are prepared to continue the war... to achieve total victory" in the event that political struggle failed to accomplish reunification. (58)
The South had always been an area of relatively weak support for the Communists. (6) And with French forces leaving South as well as North Viet-Nam, the party had now lost its greatest source of appeal. It was weakened still further by the terms of the Geneva Agreements on cessation of hostilities, which required the party-controlled Viet Minh to remove its armed forces in the South to areas north of the demarcation line. While the North Vietnamese regime could and did evade this obligation to a degree, it could not ignore the provision without reopening the war; and the bulk of the Viet Minh force in South Viet-Nam was in fact withdrawn by 1955. Some thousands of Viet Minh armed fighting men remained in the South, however, in violation of the agreement, and continued to resist government authority in some areas. (7) In addition, many party agents whose role was primarily political and subversive were explicitly ordered by the party after Geneva to remain in the South to work under cover, as some of them have since testified. (8) For their later use when the party should again turn to a strategy of force, weapons and munitions were cached in remote and secure areas; some of these were later discovered and seized by the government. Most prominent among the "stay-behinds"
was Le Duan, who remained at the head of the now-clandestine party machinery in South Viet-Nam. (9)

North Viet-Nam began immediately to work to strengthen this reduced network. In the first year after Geneva, a small number of cadres were sent across or around the demarcation line, in contravention of the agreement; some were caught and arrested. (10) A notable arrival was that of General Van Tien Dung, then and since chief of staff of the North Vietnamese Army, who dropped abruptly from public view in the North for a period in 1955-56. Intelligence reports placed him in South Viet-Nam, where he was working to organize additional military units of former Viet Minh cadres who had not gone north, and to prepare for future infiltration and expansion. (11) Part of his mission was to arrange collaboration between these illegal forces and the private armies of the Hoa Hao and Cao Dai religious sects. (Under the French colonial administration these sects had been allowed to build sizeable armed forces and to establish control over large areas in the South as more or less private domains. After 1954, they sought to retain these privileges and strongly resisted the authority of the South Vietnamese government.) (11B)
While some reorganization took place, the party's basic structure remained the same, with lines of authority and communication from the Party Central Committee at Hanoi through zone, province and district to village level. (12) Some provincial committees communicated with Hanoi by radio; many other means were also used, and the party program in the South continued to follow "the enlightened leadership of the Party Central Committee" in Hanoi, as the CRIMP notebook put it, and to be "based on the resolution and directives" issuing from that source.

North Vietnamese Policy, 1954-1959

The nature of the policy directives from North Viet-Nam to its southern agents in the immediate aftermath of Geneva has been documented from many sources, including captured party papers, defectors, interrogation of prisoners, and Hanoi's own public statements. In essence, Hanoi's policy was two-fold; on the one hand, to create the impression that it was living up to the Geneva Agreements; on the other, to build up its southern apparatus and to carry on a "political struggle," by all means legal and illegal short of open violence, against the South Vietnamese government. (13)
The party leaders recognized their lack of strength in South Viet-Nam. Speaking of the southern communists in this period, the official Lao Dong Party history concedes that "in the South, they are not attacking, but must remain temporarily on the defense. Because of this, the most suitable method of struggle is by political means," in order to "prepare every aspect for a long and difficult struggle." (14) Acknowledging the help of the armed sects at this time, the author of the CRIMP document recalls gratefully: "... thanks to the armed movement of the sects, we were able to avoid the construction of an armed propaganda force, since we had only a few former bases which were needed in the political struggle and for the creation of a reserve force."

The North Vietnamese decision at Geneva to stop the war without having won control of the South caused a loss of morale among the party's southern workers. Evidently to combat this, the party command directed that all its effectives in the South be trained or retrained to build "confidence in the Party, President Ho Chi Minh, and in victory." The instruction adds: "In order to ensure total confidence in the leadership of the party and in President Ho, and in final victory of the revolution, every individual must understand
that the signature of the Geneva Convention was a victory."

(15) Another party directive to the South explains: "... the peace is concluded to procure advantages for us, not for the purpose of ceasing the struggle." (15b)

One of these documents states the goal: "The struggle is directed at ensuring that the 'mad buffaloes,' i.e., the French imperialists and the warmongering puppets" - the South Vietnamese government "will leave our country within the next two years." And it warns, "We will gain nothing by being impatient or overbold ... Each man ... must be taught to use the legal struggle in camouflaged organizations, and to become secretly the basic element in such organizations, which will be ready for the fight on the great day of the masses." (15c)

Since the party was not strong enough to win control of South Viet-Nam by force, the communist strategy was to exploit the Geneva Agreements to accomplish the same end. (16) In making this choice, the leaders in Hanoi showed their confidence in their strengths, which were substantial: the appeal of Ho Chi Minh as a national hero, the divided anti-communist leadership, and the effective communist control of the Northern population, 3,000,000 larger than that of the South.
Specifically, the Lao Dong Party and the North Vietnamese government based their hopes on the controversial "final declaration" of the Geneva Conference, separate from the agreements on the cessation of hostilities in Viet-Nam, Laos and Cambodia, which stated that: "... the settlement ... shall permit the Vietnamese people to enjoy the fundamental freedoms, guaranteed by democratic institutions established as a result of free general elections by secret ballot. ... general elections shall be held in July 1956, under the supervision of an international commission composed of representatives of the Member States of the International Supervisory Commission, referred to in the agreement on the cessation of hostilities. Consultations will be held on this subject between the competent authorities of the two zones from 20 July 1955 onwards." (17)

Both South Viet-Nam (State of Viet-Nam) and the United States took exception to this document, which was not signed. The Vietnamese delegation and government protested strongly against this French "arrogation" of the political powers of the South and the small democratic advance of the State of Viet-Nam, which would "compromise gravely the political future of the Vietnamese people". (17B) The Diem government in the South opposed partition of the country, even temporarily, and urged United Nations administration of Viet-Nam by free, fair, free elections to be held all Viet-Nam pending U.N.-supervised elections.
Since the conference, it has been argued that the final declaration took reunification for granted, and envisaged elections merely to select a national government. The United States has understood the article to mean elections to determine whether reunification in the circumstances was in fact desired by the people of both North and South. What is indisputably clear is that the choice was to be free.

And by 1956 it was equally clear to virtually all observers that no political choice could be expressed in North Viet-Nam under conditions which might remotely be called free.

Since long before the conference, Ho Chi Minh's regime in the North had been building and expanding the familiar machinery of a communist state, in which the establishment of fundamental freedoms, democratic institutions and free elections, which Hanoi had now committed itself, has yet to become an apparent objective. (18) Political purges were causing widespread hardship. The liquidation of the landlords and ultimately of many small farmers who opposed collectivization, begun in 1953, was accelerating at so heavy a cost in life and suffering that armed revolts broke out. (19) Harsh countermesures multiplied the toll, and added further to the already heavy flow of refugees seeking to move to South
Viet-Nam. Although Hanoi repeatedly tried to block this movement south, in violation of the armistice agreement it had signed, more than 900,000 Vietnamese succeeded in quitting the North and crossing the border into South Viet-Nam. At the same time, the government armed forces were being rapidly built up and re-equipped with substantial assistance from Communist China — another violation of the armistice terms. While claiming to honor its obligations to the International Commission for Supervision and Control, the regime worked consistently to frustrate Commission efforts to inspect this build-up. 

In South Viet-Nam, on the other hand, the last of nearly 200,000 French troops had been withdrawn by April, 1956, along with an estimated $200,000,000 worth of war material, and the South Vietnamese Army had been reduced by more than 50,000 men from its 1954 strength. The British Government summarized these facts in a diplomatic note to Moscow in April, 1956, which it made public:

"The Viet-Minh (North Vietnamese) army has been greatly strengthened by the embodiment and reequipment of irregular forces that instead of the 7 Viet Minh divisions in existence in July 1954 there are now less than 20. This striking contrast between massive military expansion in the North and the withdrawal and reduction of military forces in the South speaks for itself."
All of these circumstances tended to bear out the South Vietnamese conviction that the Control Commission was ineffective and that no semblance of a genuine choice was possible in North Viet-Nam. Accordingly, the government at Saigon refused to join with Hanoi in elections. Among a number of excuses there was appeared a certain political tactics fail.

In the early years after the armistice, before the country was again swept by war, South Viet-Nam made unexpected progress in restoring order, rebuilding its economy and meeting the needs of the people. Education, health and other public services improved. In spite of the refugee influx, per capita food production had risen 20% by 1960, in contrast with a 10% decline in North Viet-Nam. While the centralization of administration, shortcomings in the land reform program and other issues aroused opposition to the government, the communist campaign for union with the North attracted few supporters.

By the end of 1955, southern Lao Dong leaders including Le Duan had already begun to fear that political tactics were doomed to failure. The rebellious sects were being disarmed or rallying to the government and the communist armed units scattered or captured. Agents were being
identified and arrested and arms stores uncovered, and the party in the South felt itself growing weaker instead of stronger.

"A mood of skepticism and non-confidence in the orientation of the struggle began to seep into the party apparatus," the CRIMP author recalls. A 1956 communist paper testifies that "among a number of comrades there has appeared a certain pessimism, a feeling of impatience, and a spirit of adventure that leads them to wish to resume the armed struggle ... the unshakeable faith in victory through the political struggle has become diminished." (21B)

There are many reports of party meetings in 1956-57 to discuss a change in tactics, and Le Duan is repeatedly represented as urging increased military action. (22) "Our political struggle in the South will sometimes have to be backed up with military action to show the strength of our forces," he told a party conference on March 18, 1956. "Therefore we should increase our forces in the South and develop military action." (22B) The same party document which reports this policy statement foreshadows the buildup of the Kontum-Pleiku area as a "very important" base "because the forces for the 'move southward' will be concentrated there." The paper
warns that "members of the Communist Party who are physically fit yet refuse to join the guerrillas will be automatically discharged from the Party".

The policy debate continued for three more years. While some southern party chiefs tried to preserve their diminishing influence over the local people by resorting increasingly to terrorism -- incidents increased sharply in late 1957, with at least 75 officials and other civilians assassinated or kidnapped in the last quarter - the scope of these operations was still relatively small. Hanoi was not yet ready to order a major change.

The CRIMP analysis illustrates revealingly the extent of northern control over the insurgent apparatus in the South. By 1958, according to the author, "the majority of the party members and cadres felt that it was necessary to immediately launch an armed struggle in order to preserve the movement and protect the forces. In several areas the party members on their own initiative had organized armed struggle against the enemy.

"Since the end of 1958 . . . the situation truly ripened for an armed movement against the enemy. But the leadership of the Nam Bo Regional Committee at that time still hesitated, for many reasons, but the principal reason was the fear of violating
the party line." Not until the Central Committee and Politburo in Hanoi had given the order was the new phase of violence launched. Why the North Vietnamese regime waited so long before intervening in force in the South is uncertain. There were serious problems at home, however, and Hanoi was providing substantial assistance in troops and supplies to the Pathet Lao rebels in Laos - another basic violation of its commitments at Geneva. The growing political disarray in Laos may have seemed likely to call for further intervention. In that event, there might well have been hesitation about committing resources to a major new effort in South Viet-Nam.

But the situation of the party in the South was becoming serious. Again from the CRIMP notebook:

"At this time [1958] the political struggle movement of the masses, although not defeated, was encountering increasing difficulty and increasing weakness; the Party bases although not completely destroyed were significantly weakened, and in some areas quite seriously; the prestige of the masses and of the revolution suffered."

1959: The Decision for War

By the end of 1958, it was clear that the party organization in the South was threatened with disaster. Action could no...
longer be delayed. "At the beginning of 1959," the Party history records, "the 15th Assembly of the Party's second Central Committee convened to analyse the situation." The Assembly's critical decision, for the public record, was couched as usual in general terms; it declared that "our people must determinedly pursue the revolution to throw off the oppressive yoke of imperialism and feudalism in the South."

The history continues, "...in 1959..." the struggle in the South entered into a new phase."(23)

The CRIMP notebook gives the new phase its name: "...it immediately took the form in South Viet-Nam of revolutionary warfare, a long-range revolutionary warfare." A party instruction of the time defined this further, as a progression by stages toward "a general armed uprising to seize the administration" of the country. For this purpose "we must strengthen armed activity to the right level." The instruction concluded, "Under the glorious leadership of the Central Executive Committee of the Party and Chairman Ho all comrades will press forward courageously."(24) Secret briefings for party cadre made this still more explicit: the Central Committee had adopted a two-part "struggle plan". To conduct the military campaign, the scattered Viet Cong units were to be built into a major fighting force - a "liberation army." To win political support for this effort, in the South
and abroad, the Party was to establish a "national liberation front," charged with attracting "all sections of the people." Other reports of 1959 and early 1960 confirm that the orders had gone out for a change to a strategy of force. Equally telling evidence appears in the number and scale of violent incidents. In late 1959, the real upsurge of terror began. By the end of the year, more than 580 civilians had been murdered. Armed attacks had increased significantly in size, with company-strength Viet Cong units appearing in assaults on army outposts and patrols. In January, 1960, the Viet Cong entered a town in Kien Hoa Province with a force several hundred strong. The war had begun.

The Political Front

There remained the need to explain this decision, which foreshadowed sacrifice and suffering for the people of North and South alike, to the party and to the public. After the Central Committee meeting, accordingly, North Vietnamese propaganda began to set the stage, by identifying North Viet-Nam more openly with the mounting insurgency in the South. Hanoi radio began to refer to Viet Cong attacks occasionally as "our attacks;" on one occasion it praised the "skill of our commander and the good will of our soldiers."
Defense Minister Vo Nguyen Giap pointed out that "the North has become a large rear echelon of our army... The North is the revolutionary base for the whole country." (28)

As the Third Congress of the Lao Dong Party in 1960 approached, Gen. Nguyen Chi Thanh, the North Vietnamese Army's chief strategist and senior political officer, and later the Viet Cong commander-in-chief in the South, explained the theoretical basis in the party journal. A bourgeois state, he wrote, will give way to a proletarian dictatorship only through "violent revolution." In the end, he noted, the key to defeat of the French had been the party's decision to start a general uprising against them. Thanh called pointedly for a buildup of both the "guerrilla troops" in the South and the regular army in the North. (29)

In September, 1960, the Third Party Congress brought together communist leaders from North and South at Hanoi. A succession of speakers sounded the theme of a large dual task ahead: "to accelerate the socialist revolution in North Viet-Nam, while at the same time stepping up the national people's democratic revolution in South Viet-Nam." (30) Le Duan, recalled to Hanoi in 1957 and now promoted to First Secretary of the Party, echoed Defense Minister Giap: "The North is the common revolutionary base of the whole country." Calling on the party "to liberate the South from the atrocious rule of the U.S. imperialists and their henchmen,"
he identified "the present national [party] congress" as one "of struggle for the achievement of national reunification."

The public had now been alerted to the contest ahead.

In his report to the Congress, Party Secretary Le Duan twice took note that "a broad national united front" must be organized in South Viet-Nam, "under the leadership of the Marxist-Leninist Party," to "assume the victory." Other speeches and resolutions at the Congress similarly suggest that plans for the Front's formation were now well along. (68)

And on January 29, 1961, Hanoi Radio announced that the National Front for the Liberation of South Viet-Nam had been born the previous month, on December 20. Announcement of the Front's program followed, in Hanoi broadcasts on February 4 and 11. (71B)

Shortly afterward, it was announced that the insurgent forces had been joined in a "Liberation Army of South Viet-Nam".

The Military Front: Infiltration Routes

Even before the 1959 Central Committee decision to take the offensive in South Viet-Nam, the North Vietnamese had begun to lay the groundwork for large-scale infiltration of men and supplies. Although the flow of northern agents, couriers, and individual cadre into the South continued uninterupted after 1954, though on a limited scale, it was in
1958 that Hanoi took the first steps to organize the movement of men and supplies, both through Laos and across the demilitarized zone, into a systematic and major effort.

A montagnard agent has described the training of tribesmen from Quang Tri and Thua Thien provinces in early 1958 at a school in the southern section of North Viet-Nam. (31) The tribesmen were taught how to establish and operate secret bases in the mountain region of Laos and South Viet-Nam. Beginning in March of that year, the agent had been sent on four missions into South Viet-Nam to establish bases and to organize local units to help operate them. The work included construction of hidden barracks in the forest to serve as future encampments for infiltrating troops.

A number of Communist prisoners have also given information on the operation of border-crossing teams formed by the North Viêt-Namese authorities in early 1959, to transport medicines, ammunition, food and documents across the demilitarized zone into South Viet-Nam. (32)

A more extensive organization for the support of infiltration by land and sea was authorized and established by Hanoi immediately following the adoption of the so-called Fifteenth Resolution -- the war decision -- by the Second Central Committee in April 1959. This committee ordered the formation of a transportation corps to support the depleted forces in their battle against the South Vietnamese. (33)
Viet Cong bases in the South. From the date of its founding—May 1959 (5/59)—this body was named the 559th Transportation Group, and was placed directly under the Party Central Committee and in close liaison with the Ministry of Security, the Army, General Staff and the Logistics Bureau. (33) A major element of the 559th Group was the 70th Battalion, formed the same month in North Viet-Nam and sent to the Laotian panhandle. This unit transported weapons, ammunition, mail and supplies from Hanoi via 20 way-stations to the southern combat zones. It also guided groups infiltrating into South Viet-Nam and brought sick and wounded personnel back. (34) Both of these organizations are still in operation, greatly expanded. Battalion 70 was established with 300 men; in two years it had grown to 2,000.

Hanoi also began in 1959 to establish an extensive seaborne infiltration channel. A number of communist sources have described the 603rd Battalion, formed in June of that year with an initial strength of 250 men, as the basic unit for clandestine maritime operations into South Viet-Nam. (35) Cadre for this organization were drawn from the North Vietnamese Army. The Battalion was under the command of the Army General Staff and was in effect a regular army unit. It was based initially near North Viet-Nam's Cuang Khe naval base, but soon expanded to other ports. By December 1959, the 603rd was reported to have 11 "infiltration cells," each with
one boat, operating from different locations along the North Vietnamese coast. (36) Over the next several years, the unit continued to expand. A prisoner captured in 1961 had taken part in 17 seagoing infiltration missions to the South since 1959. (37)

While the infiltration routes were being established, active preparations began for the training of personnel in large numbers to assume leadership positions in the insurgent units. By January 1960, a special training center for infiltrators was in operation at a North Vietnamese Army base in Son Tay, northwest of Hanoi. (38) Early in the year, the 324th Division was ordered to begin training infiltrators in Nghe An Province. (39) This division subsequently trained a very large number of individual cadres and whole units for infiltration. The famous Xuan Mai Infiltration Training Center was also set up during this period, southwest of Hanoi in the former barracks of the 228th Brigade. (40) A large number of captured infiltrators have described this school, which appears to have been able to handle several 1,000-man classes at one time.

Providing the Leadership Core

Under the strict military intelligence standards used to measure this infiltration, the accepted testimony of at least two prisoners, defectors, or documents is required for
technical "confirmation" of other reports and indirect evidence of such infiltrating group. By this standard, more than 18,000 men are "confirmed" as having infiltrated South from North Viet-Nam between 1959 and 1963, and there is other information concerning at least 12,500 more (see Table I).

These 18,000 to 30,000 men or more in 1959-63 were a very important increment in Viet Cong strength. But their number is only part of their significance.

Until late 1963, most of these infiltrators were ethnic Southerners, former Viet Minh troops who had been "regrouped" to the north after the 1954 armistice and had become regular soldiers of the North Vietnamese army. Most of the southern regroupees had been retained in military units, which suggests that Hanoi even then may have been laying the groundwork for their redeployment southward should the need arise. They were formed into the 305th, 325th, 330th, and 338th Divisions of the North Vietnamese Army, and up to 1959, these divisions were reported to be composed entirely of South Vietnamese.

Most of the early infiltrators were thus veterans with years-long military experience and training. Their southern origins, of course, did not alter the illegality under the armistice of their infiltration.
In addition, the overwhelming majority of the infiltrators through 1963 were experienced officers or senior noncommissioned officers. A high proportion of them, through 1961, were members of the communist (Lao Dong) party. (42) On arrival in South Viet-Nam, they assumed command positions in the Viet Cong forces, from the regimental echelon down to squad level, and they could and did carry out a wide range of political assignments as well. One prisoner has described the subsequent assignments of a group sent south from the infiltration school at Son Tay, North Viet-Nam, in March, 1960. All members of his group were experienced officers or NCO's who took leading positions in Viet Cong units in Quang Ngai Province. One became a company commander, another became political commissar of a battalion and another was deputy commander of the same battalion.

To an important degree, the infiltrators thus provided the core of the insurgent military and political apparatus, and much of the drive and skill necessary for its growth into a formidable force.

At the end of 1960, the strength of the Communist main forces in the South (as opposed to local units and guerrillas, then totaling 30,000) was estimated at around 5,500 men, with 10 battalions. One year later, these forces had increased...
despite losses to more than 26,000 men in 20 battalions, and
the expansion was continuing rapidly (see Table II). The
influx from the North was the critical element in this
growth.

Another sign of this intervention became visible in
1961. Earlier, the Viet Cong forces had equipped themselves
from Viet Minh caches of old French and American weapons left
behind in 1954, by local manufacture of crude hand guns and
rifles, and by capturing weapons from South Vietnamese units.
In 1961, however, Hanoi became more actively involved as a
supplier, and modified versions of the French Mat-49 rifle
began to appear on the battlefield, with the chamber reworked
to use the standard Communist 7.62 mm cartridge -- a technique
requiring factory tooling.

1961: The American Response

On October 19, 1961, in the face of the mounting tide of
this communist attack, President Diem proclaimed a state of
emergency in South Viet-Nam.

Up to this time, in compliance with the Geneva armistice
terms, the number of American military advisers in South
Viet-Nam was very small - fewer than (500) men. On
November 16, 1961, with the approval of the National Security
Council, President Kennedy decided to bolster South Viet-Nam's
military strength; the number of U. S. armed forces advisers
would be increased, but American combat forces would not be committed at this time.

This decision was taken nearly three years after the critical war-making resolution of the Lao Dong Party Central Committee, at the beginning of 1959. In order to assist the lower Vietnamese forces who were increasingly in need of assistance to meet the growing communist military threat.
II

THE DECISION TO COMMIT THE NORTH VIETNAMESE ARMY

For five years following the adoption of the Central Committee's Resolution, Hanoi and the Party worked to build their "liberation" army and front and to portray them as native South Vietnamese organs of revolt. In fact, both were conceived and controlled from the start by the Party.

The Communists in Indochina had several times earlier adopted the cover of a large front movement. Resisting the Japanese during World War II, they had organized the old Viet Minh league. In 1946 they formed the Lien Viet, or Viet-Nam United Front, later merged with the Viet Minh, to conceal Communist direction of the war against France. After 1954, Hanoi organized the Viet-Nam Fatherland Front to garner support for "reunification." This organization was headquartered in North Viet-Nam and had had little success in winning public support in the South. Hanoi had therefore decided to build a new communist front, based this time in the South and ostensibly independent, to appeal more effectively to the South Vietnamese and foreign publics.

The tactic of the Communist front movement in Viet-Nam as elsewhere has been to establish very general public objectives which it hopes to see accepted by the majority of
people, and to seek support from every large section of the population. An excellent explanation of the party's goals in establishing the National Liberation Front was contained in instructions to inter-province committees from the Viet Cong Regional Committee for the South in January 1961. It concludes: "This line of conduct is only a temporary policy of the Party. When the revolution is crowned with success, this policy will be revised. Then the Party will act overtly... The policy of the Front will help us to control the majority of the people and to isolate the enemy..." (71)

The Liberation Army

To conceal its own responsibility, Hanoi intended the National Liberation Front to provide a cover for all facets of Communist activity in South Viet-Nam, military as well as political. When formation of the "Liberation Army of South Viet-Nam" was announced, Hanoi stressed that the insurgent armed forces had been joined under the leadership of the Front. In fact, the buildup of the Viet Cong army had been in progress for nearly two years, in execution of the Central Committee's secret "struggle plan," and its leadership came
exclusively from the Party.

Today, the Viet Cong continue to try to carry out their activities as far as possible in the name of the Front.

Several documents have been captured which describe in detail the Communist role in organizing and directing the "Liberation Army" - supposedly the creature of the Front. Among them is a Liberation Army training bulletin, obtained in Vinh Long Province in 1963, which discusses the "birth, nature, methods, and tasks" of this organ for the benefit of its military cadre, and states:

-- "Since the end of 1959...the Party has pushed the people to arm themselves...and sparked a fiery revolutionary movement..."

-- "The present Liberation Army has been organized by the Party."

-- "The Party directly led the Liberation Army and organized the three Branches" (i.e., main, local, and guerrilla forces).

-- "The Party set up political cells, intercells, committees and political action system in the Liberation Army."
The Party indoctrinated and trained the Liberation Army unceasingly...

The bulletin defines the goals of the Liberation Army as follows:

- "Immediate goal: Overthrow My-Diem [communist catchword meaning 'U.S. imperialism'] and the Diem government in South Viet-Nam ... preparatory to peaceful unification of the country."
- "Long term goal: extermination of the predatory classes... ultimately a socialist, Communist state..."

The document concludes that "the Army must strictly carry out the policies of the Party vis-a-vis the people, and follow the Party's collective leadership. For this reason when one refers to the organization of the Army, one has to concern oneself with the organization of the Party."

A copy of the Communist high command's "Regulations for the Party Committee System in the South Viet-Nam Liberation Army" was captured in March 1966. It opens with a "General Regulation" providing that "the Liberation Army is...an instrument for the Party...for the liberation of South Viet-Nam..."
and the reunification of the Fatherland. Therefore various Party committee echelons at every level "are responsible for the leadership in every field of various armed and paramilitary forces placed under their supervision. They have the authority to use these forces for the common political mission." The document goes on to detail the responsibilities of the Party committees at each level in guiding the military forces. (73)

Control of the Liberation Front

Communist control of the National Liberation Front in its political aspect is equally comprehensive, as many documents and statements of party members testify. The testimony of a party cadre who played a role in the Western Region Front Committee before his capture in 1962 is representative. (74) In all departments, he said, the Front committee leadership included Lao Dong Party agents who directed the work. While in theory the Front committee in his area assumed responsibility for the insurgents' military, political, economic, and cultural affairs, in reality it had little authority. Its principal function was to conduct overt propaganda campaigns.
Similarly, a party study document brought in by a communist defector in 1963, headed "Action upon the Population in Saigon-Cholon," describes the commanding Party role in the affairs of the Front in the Saigon area. It repeats the basic fact that "the Front is a national organization under Party leadership" intended to bring together "all anti-imperialists and anti-feudalist forces in South Viet-Nam: workers, farmers, large and small-scale proprietors, and nationalists." After describing the propaganda tasks assigned to the Front, it points out that "these activities are the task of every 'liberation association,' cadre and Party member. Therefore, in addition to the task of building up their own organizations, Party members and 'liberation association' members should be thoroughly acquainted with the Front, and should carry out efficiently the above mentioned activities of the Front."

Communist defectors and prisoners of leadership grade all show a realistic awareness of the nature of the Front and its temporary role. In this respect a North Vietnamese naval officer and Party member who was captured in 1966 is typical. He observed that once South Viet-Nam had been "liberated," the Front would suffer the same fate as the Viet Minh did in North Viet-Nam after the French had withdrawn: it would atrophy and quickly disappear. The Communist Party, he indicated, would be the only survivor of all the Front organs and appendages. (76)
Leadership of the Front

In an effort to create an appearance of broad popular opposition to the Saigon government, the Communists presented as ostensible leaders of the National Liberation Front a number of "progressive" South Vietnamese who could not be positively identified as Communist party members. These men were to conduct the day-to-day public activities of the Front, while remaining pliable to covert Communist direction. For this purpose the Party undoubtedly hoped to find persons of prestige, who could attract support from intellectuals, religious groups, professionals and soldiers as well as workers and peasants.

It would appear that the Communists had difficulty in securing suitable personnel for all of the top public posts in the Front. Although the first Liberation Front Central Committee announced in March 1962 reserved places for 52 members, it contained only 31 names, most of them little known even in South Vietnam. (77)

The second Central Committee, announced in January 1964, had only 41 members. (78) Of the 31 who had served on the first committee, only about half retained their posts on the second, which suggested that some of the original appointees had proved incapable or unwilling to perform their role. And despite the party's efforts to conceal its sponsorship of the Front, a number of those placed in conspicuous NLF posts have had known Communist associations.
The Chairman of the Front Central Committee and its principal spokesman, Nguyen Huu Tho, is a lawyer who has been involved in pro-
Communist agitation in Viet-Nam since the late 1940's. A ranking Communist defector has called him "a straw man" and "figurehead" with "no real power." (79) Nguyen Van Kieu, the first secretary-general of the Front, was a journalist who had spent most of his career propagandizing for the Communists and for North Viet-Nam. Nguyen Tan Phat, the present secretary-general, has been associated with leadership of Communist-front parties since at least 1944.

In the early years of the Front, a number of former Viet Cong identified Vo Chi Cong, a vice chairman of the Front Central Committee, as one of the top Party officials in the South and a key figure in its Communist management. An overt communist, he was usually described as the official primarily responsible for the civilian proselytizing activities of the Party, and had been active in Communist-front causes since the 1930's. Last year he was reportedly replaced after going to Hanoi for hospital care. (79b)

Tran Nam Trung, the name used by another high-ranking member of the Front, is actually an alias used in the past by more than one important Communist leader in the South. Prisoners and defectors for the last several years have consistently identified Tran Nam Trung as Major General Tran Van Tra of the North Vietnamese Army, a top Viet Cong commander for much of
the post-Geneva period and an alternate member of the Lao Dong Party Central Committee in Hanoi. (80) He has not appeared in the North since October 1963, when he apparently reinfilttrated the South. He has since been identified as the deputy commander of the insurgent armed forces. (81) "Tran Van Trung" does not give interviews or travel abroad as do other titular Front leaders. To do so would doubtless reveal his actual identity.

The People's Revolutionary Party

In addition to forming the National Liberation Front, Hanoi decided on another measure to conceal the North Vietnamese hand in the affairs of the South. This was to give the appearance of separating the Communist elements in South Viet-Nam from the party in the North by giving them a different party identity - a repetition of the tactic applied in 1951, when the former Indochina Communist Party in Viet-Nam became the Lao Dong (Workers') Party. In January 1962, accordingly, Hanoi Radio announced that a conference of "Marxist-Leninist" delegates in South Viet-Nam had organized a new party -- a "People's Revolutionary Party" (PRP), to serve "workers, peasants, and laborers" in South Viet-Nam as a "vanguard group". The new party, according to the broadcast, had immediately "volunteered" to join the Liberation Front. (82)

While the Communists portray the PRP in public as an independent entity, they have privately instructed their cadres on the reality -- namely, that
the new party is nothing more than the existing southern elements of the Lao Dong Party under a new name. A Communist document captured in 1962, for example, contained instructions concerning the PRP from the party committee in Ha Xuyen Province to its district committees. "The creation of this party is only a matter of strategy; it needs to be explained within the party," the committee wrote. To deceive the enemy, it is necessary that the new party be given the outward appearance corresponding to a division of the Lao Dong Party into two and the founding of a new party, so that the enemy cannot use it" -- the Lao Dong Party's subservience to a head office in Hanoi -- "in his propaganda." The committee went on: "The People's Revolutionary Party has only the appearance of an independent existence; actually, our party is nothing but the Lao Dong Party of Viet-Nam, unified from North to South, under the direction of the Central Executive Committee of the Party, the Chief of which is President Ho."

A 1966 party directive captured in the delta told cadre the correct party line to take during the annual anniversary celebration of the founding of the Indochina Communist Party. It stated that "on this occasion, the masses who have good sympathy towards the Party should be well-informed that the (former) Indochinese Communist Party, the Lao Dong Party and the People's Revolutionary Party are one party, headed by the Central Committee with Chairman Ho at the head." The circular also cautioned party chapters to "make much reservation in disseminating this news to the bad elements."
Like the establishment of the Liberation Front, the proclamation of the FRP was an effort by Hanoi to improve the propaganda image of the insurgency in the South as a native patriotic movement. It also facilitated Party control of the Front by giving the Communists an open voice in its public councils. Conferences attended by non-Communist organizations belonging to the Front, for example, could be more easily manipulated through the FRP’s overt participation.

There is also direct evidence that Hanoi tries to conceal the North Vietnamese role in directing the political and military campaigns in the South. A Communist dispatch captured in 1965, for example, reprimands a southern party unit for copying and distributing a message from the North Vietnamese Ministry of Public Health to the party medical section in South Viet-Nam as a violation of party “secrecy regulations.” The dispatch called on the recipient to avoid such disclosures in future. Similarly a party letter captured in 1966 complains that the movement’s Liberation News Agency and radio have referred openly to “Uncle Ho, party leadership, class struggle, etc.” Such revealing propaganda is “not appropriate,” the writer warns. “The Central Party Committee directs that propaganda should rather praise nationalism, patriotism, revolutionary heroism and the role of the National Liberation Front. Indoctrination and propaganda referring to Uncle Ho, Party, class struggle, etc., should be conducted orally within internal organizations and among the people only.” Provincial committees are further instructed that Party flags and portraits of Ho can
be hung "only in conferences held by party chapters." The Front Flag
and portrait of Nguyen Huu Tho (Chairman of the Front) should be hung at
other conferences, attended by non-communists. (86)

1963-64: The Decision to Escalate

By 1964, with this civil and military organization grown to formidable
size, the Communists had reason to believe they were well on their way to
victory in South Viet-Nam. Under the pressure of political subversion and
armed attack, the Diem government had become increasingly dictatorial; in
November 1963 it fell to a coup, after a violent confrontation with
dissident Buddhists. Political instability in Saigon deepened, Army
effectiveness declined, and the strategic hamlet program started by Diem
disintegrated. To capitalize on this trend, Hanoi decided to commit its
army and resources on a still broader scale in a drive for final success.

It is probable that this decision was made at least tentatively at
the 9th Session of the Party's Third Central Committee in December 1963
This meeting, a captured document states, "assessed the balance of forces
between us and the enemy and set forth plans and guidelines to win the
special war." (63) At this conference, Ho Chi Minh called on "every person"
in the North to "work as hard as two in order to compensate for our brothers
in the South" -- that is, for the increasing cost of the war. Party leaders
reported that the campaign in the South was moving very favorably: "Our
people are currently engaged in a continuous attack." The "political
crisis in Saigon was worsening and the authority of the government "steadily declining." The victory which lay just ahead, in other words, would justify the yet greater efforts which were required meanwhile.

One of the first effects of the new decision in Hanoi was the appearance in South Viet-Nam of large numbers of ethnic North Vietnamese troops. The pool of trained and physically fit southern regroupes was running dry. Prisoners statements showed that at least 50 percent of the infiltrators during 1964 were natives of North Viet-Nam. Many of these men had been drafted, in contrast to the well-trained cadre sent south in earlier years. A number of the draftees soon deserted or were taken prisoner by South Vietnamese forces. (46)

Another effect of the Party decision was the massive enlargement of logistical support operations. With the eastern portions of the Laotian panhandle securely under Communist control, Hanoi began as early as 1964 to develop its infiltration trails into an army-scale supply route, capable of handling continuous heavy truck traffic to South Viet-Nam. At that time the motorable roads from the Laos-North Viet-Nam border, at the Mu Gia Pass, southward to the vicinity of Muong Ngan in Laos, measured approximately 180 miles. A large group of North Vietnamese army construction battalions in at least three "Combined Forces" (Binh Tram 3, 4 and 5) were deployed in the area by 1964 to oversee the development of this roadnet. (67)
Since then, the roadways have been extended more than 440 miles further south and across the border into South Viet-Nam. Supplies trucked deep into the Laotian panhandle are transferred to porters and pack animals to be moved through the wilderness to Communist supply depots in the Central Highlands of South Viet-Nam. The scope of this effort, which was not to become fully evident until 1966, indicates the scale of North Vietnamese war planning in 1964.

Infiltration by Regiment

The next step involved complete North Vietnamese army units up to regimental size (see Table III). Some regular Army units are known to have begun preparing for infiltration as early as April 1964. Several prisoners from the 95th Regiment of the 325th Division, for example, have reported that their unit was recalled in that month from duty in Laos, where it was helping the Pathet Lao to control the northern Laotian panhandle.

(97) Back in North Viet-Nam, the 95th underwent special military and political training in preparation for operations in the South.

In August 1964, the first complete tactical unit of the North Vietnamese Army, the 808th Battalion, left the North. (48) This was a new unit, with cadre drawn mainly from the 325th Division. It arrived in South Viet-Nam in November.

This was followed in the fall by deployment of other elements of the 325th Division. The 95th Regiment arrived in December, 2,000 men strong, the great majority of them native North Vietnamese. (49) In early 1965 the
unit was already participating in heavy attacks on South Vietnamese army elements around Route 19 in Phu Bon Province.

Next to arrive was the 101st Regiment, 325th Division, in February 1965, with another 2,000 men. According to a deserter, the mission of the 101st Regiment was to "liberate" the areas along National Route 14 in Kontum Province and take over South Vietnamese army posts. (50)

The last regiment of the 325th Division to arrive in this first wave was the 18th, in April 1965 -- estimated strength again around 2,000. (51) Each of these regiments left cadres in North Viet-Nam to form new regiments to come south in the fall of 1965.

Following the three line regiments, support units of the Division infiltrated south -- transportation battalions and medical, security, signal and engineer companies. Their move began in March 1965 and was completed in June. (52)

In addition to re-training existing units of the North Vietnamese Army for infiltration in the spring of 1964, Hanoi also began to form new regimental-sized units for dispatch to the South. One of these, the 32nd Regiment, was activated sometime in the spring of 1964, with personnel drawn from a number of established army units. Draftees who had been trained at the Son Tay and Xuan Mai infiltration centers were added. The regiment began its infiltration in the fall of 1964, and all three battalions had arrived in South Viet-Nam by March 1965. (53)
In July and August 1965, five more line regiments of the North Vietnamese Army left for the south -- the 22nd, 250th, 33rd, 66th and 21st. All five of these regiments deployed to northern sections of South Viet-Nam, adding about 8,500 troops to the Viet Cong strength. The 64th Regiment, exceptionally, was formed in the same area from one Viet Cong battalion and two North Vietnamese battalions, totaling 1,500 men, at about this time. The first two new regiments built around cadre of the original 325th Division, Regiments 188 and 258, left the North in December and arrived in Binh Yen and Kontum provinces with 4,000 men in February and March 1966.

Impact of Infiltration

The overall effect of the infiltration of regular North Vietnamese Army units during 1964 and 1965 was an addition of 12 regiments with approximately 33 battalions to the combined North Vietnamese Army-Viet Cong forces in the South. At the end of 1965, the communist regular forces, including North Vietnamese units, were estimated at more than 90,000 troops. Integral North Vietnamese Army units accounted for more than 26,000 of them, and North Vietnamese replacements in Viet Cong units for a great many more. By early 1966, the supply of men and materials from North Viet-Nam was so extensive and so important to the war effort that a secret Central Committee resolution could state, accurately, that "North Vietnamese main forces are the organic mobile forces of South Viet-Nam" -- i.e., the main attack strength.
Multi-Regimental Campaign of Maneuver

From a tactical standpoint, Hanoi apparently planned from the start to use its infiltrated regular units as a mobile reserve, capable of contributing heavily to the classic concentration of forces relied on by the Communists for major attacks. With their mobility, strength, and firepower the North Vietnamese regiments and battalions could maneuver to pose threats in widely separated areas and could force the South Vietnamese Army to thin out its reserve forces. Most of the army of South Viet-Nam was tied down on security missions throughout the country, and as the Communist pressures increased its reserve was dwindling.

By March 1965, when the three regiments of the 325th Division were in place and ready in the Central Highlands, the Communist command could put this tactic into effect. The campaign of maneuver by multi-regimental forces began.

During March and April, the first elements of the North Vietnamese Army clashed with South Vietnamese troops. In March the 101st North Vietnamese Regiment engaged an ARVN (South Vietnamese) ranger battalion northwest of Kontum City in Kontum Province, and the 18th and 95th Regiments, deployed in Binh Dinh Province, pressed large attacks near Qui Nhon in April. In May, two Viet Cong regiments clashed with two ARVN battalions at Ba Cia in Quang Ngai Province, and the 32nd North Vietnamese Regiment seized the outpost at Duc Do, overran the district town and effectively took control of Route 19 from Pleiku to the Cambodian border. At Dong Xoai the same month Viet Cong units battered an ARVN battalion. Another
multi-regimental operation followed at Song Be, with both sides taking heavy casualties. In early June, the 95th Regiment surrounded and mauled an ARVN airborne force in Phu Bon Province. In August, the 101st Regiment ranged through Kontum Province, overran Tou Moroung District headquarters and seized control of Route 14.

In six months of fierce fighting, the Communist forces had established control over the essential border area with Laos, the terminal zone for their infiltration and supply routes. They effectively controlled the Central Highlands. Large-scale introduction of regular North Vietnamese Army units and troops had made that possible.

1965: The American Response

It seems very possible that the Gulf of Tonkin episode was another reflection of North Vietnamese confidence that victory was in sight, and the United States faced with little choice but withdrawal. On August 2 and 4, 1964, North Vietnamese torpedo boats attacked first one and then two U.S. destroyers in international waters of the gulf. At the second attack, President Johnson ordered retaliatory air strikes against the PT-boats and supporting naval bases on the North Vietnamese coast. No further U.S. air attacks against North Viet-Nam were carried out for six months.

It was not until February 1965 - at least a year after Hanoi's decision to commit its army in the South on a broad scale - that the United States decided to bomb military targets in the North on a continuing basis. The
decision to send small numbers of U.S. combat troops to South Viet-Nam followed in March, and a further decision to begin a large-scale military build-up was taken in July. By then, after following a reorganization, training and movement timetable going back to early 1964, North Vietnamese regiments in South Viet-Nam had already fought and won their first campaign.