

Terrorism as a Component of Insurgency during the Era of Ngo Dinh Diem

The purpose of this paper is to peruse the history of the insurgent forces use of terrorism in South Vietnam during the Ngo Dinh Diem administration. As we shall see, the terror campaign became quite significant in the early 1960's as the Viet Cong/NLF were desperately attempting to dislodge the grip that the Diem government had in the rural villages. But one should not forget the Communists never envisioned terror to be a stand-alone tool (such as the modern-day jihadists perceive it to be) even though it proved to be one of their most powerful. Instead, terror was simply part and parcel of an overarching campaign to wrest political legitimacy from the hands of Ngo Dinh Diem and place it squarely in their own. This is not to say that the Communists then, or now, held terror in low-esteem, as indeed – it would be hard to think of any historical Communist undertaking that did not rely on terror. History has made this plain: i.e., Communist parties, everywhere, simply used terror as an everyday method and that it was one amongst several tools that the frequently availed themselves of.

The Communists invoke Strategic Paralysis through the Implementation of a Terror Campaign: "The Destruction of the Oppression" –

President Ngo Dinh Diem had managed to produce order out of chaos and in a relatively short period of time. His Communist adversaries were, in an odd way, realists and by 1958 they understood that they had a problem on their hands as South Vietnam was not disintegrating into the kind of chaos which would have made a reintegration with the North a foregone conclusion.¹ They also understood that there were many grievances which they could exploit and organise in

¹ William Colby phrased the issue this way: "The communists basically had gone into a holding pattern in 1954, believing that Diem was going to collapse. So did most of the rest of the world. The communists had withdrawn some fifty thousand of their people back to the north. They had put their networks into a state of stay-behind--suspension--and there really wasn't much problem." William Colby, "William E. Colby on Vietnam, Interview I." Recorded interview by Ted Gittinger, June 2, 1981, p. 1., Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Oral History Program; (Transcript copies available from the LBJ Library Oral History Program, University of Texas at Austin).

the form of an indigenous political movement in the South - no emerging nation, at least in Southeast Asia, was immune from such problems.² But political action with a duly subordinated military/terror campaign was what was required to break the bonds being formed between the Diem government and the people.

The Communists intentions, through the means of terrorism, were not merely “selective” but overarching, as they were designed for the purpose of frightening the people away from helping and supporting the government; indeed, as they testified themselves:

*“Our purpose was not only to eliminate those who could be harmful to the movement but also with a view toward making the people afraid and to prevent them from co-operating with the government.”*³

Or, as Alexander Dallin and George W. Breslauer noted in their study, *Political Terror In Communist Systems*: “Even a mistaken assumption or vague rumour in the population that arbitrary repression is about to occur may be as productive of terror as its purposive use.”⁴

Thus, the Communist assessment was correct and precise in exactly who had to be targeted in order to make certain that the ‘Diem miracle’ would be brought to an end and, indeed, the political legitimacy of his government challenged to the point where it would become not viable. Specifically, the Communists were targeting Diem’s leadership, which had a thorough and unique legitimacy in Vietnamese culture.⁵

² Sir Robert Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency: Experiences from Malaya and Vietnam*, (London: Chatto & Windus, 1966), pp. 21 - 23.

³ Vietnam J-2, *Studies of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam*, (Saigon: the Rand Corporation, Mimeographed), DT-99, p. 2. Found in the notes of Andrews, *The Village War*, pp. 51, 54 & 55.

⁴ Alexander Dallin and George W. Breslauer, *Political Terror in Communist Systems*, (Stanford, [Calif.]: Stanford University Press, 1970), p. 5. The authors go on to note why Communist systems are so dependent on the use of terror: “Most instances of massive political terror under Communism appear to have served the functions of destroying or inhibiting all rival authorities, and of insulating the population from all incongruent value systems. The net effect is to eliminate all organised political opposition and to facilitate socialisation by exposing the population to a single, unchallenged system of values.” p. 7.

⁵ Hammer, *A Death In November*, p. 47.

The ‘Destruction of the Oppression’ –

The “Destruction of the Oppression,” as the terror campaign was called, spanned the gamut between (and including) few to no killings to outright massacre and slaughter:

At other times, in different circumstances, the terror of the Destruction of the Oppression, which apologists for the Party have often excused on the grounds that it was “selective,” could take on the appearance of a charnel house. In a Cai Lay village that had changed hands between the Front and the South Vietnamese Government four times in as many years, twenty persons, including women, were accused of being Government spies: “They all had their heads cut off and their bodies were thrown in the street. On them were pinned the charges written on a piece of paper. Government cadres were terrorised... and slow[ed] down their activities.”⁶

The scene of another particularly bestial execution was visited by Malcome Browne. The hamlet chief in this instance had been tied to a stake in the middle of the market place in full view of the assembled villagers. The man was slowly disembowelled, his children decapitated, and his pregnant wife then tied to the same stake and similarly disembowelled.”⁷

The Communists clearly understood that terror worked best when it paralysed the greatest amount of people and thus it was most effective when it would seem to be only partially selective to the villagers - much like lightning, wherein no-one could predict who would get hit next.

The Party at times accused and then executed or humiliated certain persons for their pro-Government activities when even a cursory examination would have revealed the charges to be baseless. Had the Party been consistently discriminatory, eliminating only those persons widely known to be class enemies, then the terror would have become highly predictable and incapable of creating the desired level of anxiety response among the villagers.⁸

In his studies, tours, and interviews within South Vietnam, author William R. Andrews, determined that the killings of village officials, schoolteachers, public-health workers, and other civil servants reached its peak in the year 1963 with a definite decline noticed in 1964.⁹ Andrews

⁶ W.P. Davison, *Some Observations on Viet Cong Operations in the Villages*, (Santa Monica, [California]: The Rand Corporation, 1967), p. 25.

⁷ Malcome Browne, *The New Face of War*, (New York, [NY]: Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1965), p. 103.

⁸ Andrews, *The Village War*, pp. 57 - 58.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

has argued that the sharp drop in killings of Government civil workers in 1964 was owing to a combination of factors such as: in the first place, by 1964, the Destruction of the Oppression had been effective in eliminating Government workers from areas that had been penetrated by the Party earlier on;¹⁰ secondly, he argues, that the South Vietnamese officials in the rural areas, by this time, were no longer exposing themselves to the Party cadre and, thus, were avoiding death; in this avoidance, Andrews states that the officials were no longer exposing the population of the rural villages to the Government.¹¹ Here are the figures which Andrews has drawn attention to and, indeed, which are relevant to the arguments being made:¹²

Year	Assassinations
1957 – 1960	1,700
1961	1,300
1962	1,700
1963	2,000
1964	500

(These figures of Andrews' are supported by the studies of Douglas Pike and warrant careful consideration in light of the thesis at hand.¹³)

There is, however, a third explanation which has overarching strategic implications and that explanation is that by 1964, it was no longer necessary to kill civil workers and discredit the GVN to the same extent because the Government's most powerful and substantial pillar of political legitimacy had been removed, i.e., Ngo Dinh Diem; and, accordingly, even with military power attempting (in futility) to fill the political vacuum left behind by the demise of Diem it was just a matter of time before the whole structure collapsed. Communist though they were, the insurrectionists were also Vietnamese and they knew that soldiers could never take the place of a

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 60.

¹³ Douglas Pike, *Viet Cong*, (Cambridge, [MA]: MIT Press, 1966), p. 102.

moral, ascetic-scholar, Confucianist leader like Diem in the hearts and the minds of the average Vietnamese. The importance of the strategic political victory gained in the murder of Ngo Dinh Diem cannot be minimised.

Probably not even in their wildest dreams could the Communists have imagined that it would be certain Americans who would, unwittingly, help them the most in undermining Ngo Dinh Diem and bringing his government down in ruins. Ho Chi Minh and Vo Nguyen Giap both knew the quality of their adversary in Ngo Dinh Diem; they knew that the moral example set by this scholarly gentleman cut across all levels of Vietnamese society, including the newest and shallowest imposed through contact with modernity (i.e., during the World War and during their increasing contact with things Western brought in by the French), and that his example as a true Confucian leader, who had the mandate of heaven, was the most formidable obstacle they would face in reintegrating all of Vietnam under their revolutionary government.¹⁴ They both had tried,¹⁵ Giap on a number of occasions and Ho on one important attempt, to win Diem over to

¹⁴ Ho and Giap knew exactly where Diem was placed in terms of Vietnamese custom and respect: "The Confucian ethic and the Taoist concept of universal harmony and universal order totally disregard material wealth. In the Vietnamese hierarchy of values, a rich man is a troc phu (filthy rich), and a poor scholar is thanh ban (immaculate poor). The traditional Vietnamese social order followed this scale: first, the si (scholars, men of letters); second, the nong (peasants, farmers); third, the cong (workers); fourth, the thuong (businessmen, merchants); and fifth, and last, the binh (soldiers)." Tran Van Dinh, "Why Every American Should Read Kim Van Kieu," in *We The Vietnamese: Voices From Vietnam*, Francois Sully, ed., (New York, [NY]: Praeger Publishers, Inc., 1971), pp. 236 - 237. If anything, the upstarts against Vietnamese tradition were more truly found in these two Communist revolutionaries who certainly managed to maintain the Confucian veneer - which they realised was so necessary in order to assure political legitimacy in the eyes of the Vietnamese people. But in Diem, Ho and Giap were up against the genuine article, Diem's family and background placed the mantle of Confucian authority on him and his character confirmed what Vietnamese wisdom and tradition had anointed by birth.

¹⁵ During the immediate pre-Second World War years (and during the war itself) Diem used to meet with Vietnamese nationalists from across the political spectrum at secret meetings in Saigon. Their talk was of revolution, but no concrete plans emerged. In fact, the only significant event that occurred at these meetings in terms of Diem's political development was his opportunity to meet, assess and influence Vo Nguyen Giap, the later successful commander of the Viet-Minh. Resisting Diem's non-socialist approach, Giap, in return attempted to convert Diem. Neither was successful, although they did earn each other's mutual respect and admiration. Robert Shaplen, "A Reporter In Vietnam: Diem," in *The New Yorker*, (Sept. 22, 1962), p. 108.

their cause and they had failed.¹⁶ But they also sensed that the Americans were Diem's Achilles-heel and that through them a successful assault on Diem's legitimacy was their best hope. One of the ways to cause doubt in the ever impatient Americans was to cause trouble in the villages and rural scene where, presumably, the GVN had been hard at work spending US aid dollars. This, in turn, would cause debate about the effectiveness of Diem's government.

This writer believes that Professor Pike has the most and the best supporting evidence in his argument (duly noted in the introduction) that confirms the fact that all evidence pointed toward a superb Communist insurgent organisational infrastructure being in place even before Diem had truly taken up the reins of power.¹⁷

¹⁶ In September, 1945, the Vietminh had murdered Diem's brother, Khoi, and, having been captured himself, Diem was brought before Ho Chi Minh. Ho tried to convince Diem to work with him and the Vietminh. Diem refused, bluntly stating that he could never work with the murderers of his brother and that he had nothing in common with the destroyers of his country. Deeply impressed with Diem's raw courage, all the while protesting that he knew nothing of Khoi's murder, Ho amazingly informed Diem that he was free to go. Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*, (New York, [NY]: Viking Press/Penguin Books, 1984), pp. 216 - 217. Karnow was able to have this story confirmed in early 1981 by the propaganda chief of the Vietnamese Communist Party, Hoang Tung. Mr. Tung indicated to Karnow that Ho's leniency toward Diem had been a mistake.

¹⁷ Professor Pike also makes it abundantly clear that, even before there was a Ngo Dinh Diem government, the Communists had an overarching strategy which was based upon the reunification of all Vietnam under the Party: "The goal of unification, one Vietnam under the Party's banner, became an objective as soon as it became a problem at the 1954 Geneva Conference. Not liberation of the South, nor a revolution in the society there, but unification alone was the Party's undeviating purpose until it was achieved nearly twenty years later. The Party never hid this fact, as even a casual inspection of its pronouncements and leader's speeches through the years clearly demonstrates....The question of how to deal with the South had long plagued the Party. Failure to assign priority to the region in the early 1950s resulted in the Party's inability to seize the opportunity offered by the French withdrawal. Later in the decade, uncertainty as to how to proceed continued, although the picture painted by some historians - the Party passively waiting for the South to collapse - is inaccurate. The Party had a clear objective, unification, and a strategy that was dynamic even if unsuccessful....The sense of the 1954 Sixth Plenum contained the hope, as opposed to the expectation, that the French and other participants in the conference would 'implement' the agreement and bring about unification. Meantime, political struggle pressure would be applied in the South to help topple the shaky Ngo Dinh Diem government....The second period was the revolutionary guerrilla war phase, from 1959 until late 1964, when unification was sought by means of a mix of armed struggle, in the form of revolutionary guerrilla war, and political struggle, through the instrument of the National Liberation Front. The expectation was that the two prongs could create sufficient social pathology, anarchy, and simple chaos to bring down the Diem government and lead eventually to a government amenable to unification. The strategy did indeed tear up the South Vietnamese society. It also was militarily effective. By 1964 the Party controlled two-thirds of the country's 2,500 villages." Douglas Pike, *History of Vietnamese Communism, 1925 - 1976*, (Stanford, [Calif.]: Hoover

In his studies concerned with the late 1950's in South Vietnam, scholar Dennis Duncanson, confirmed Douglas Pike's argument - as he had observed that the Communists had not been idle during or since President Diem's initial triumphs over the sects (Binh Xuyen, Cao Dai, and Hoa Hao).¹⁸ According to Duncanson they had left a 'sleeper' or a hidden party base in most villages,¹⁹ and threats, coercion and selective assassinations kept peasants in a perpetual state of terror.²⁰ The excuse of not holding the Geneva Accord's designated re-unification

Institution Press - Stanford University, 1978), pp. 115 - 118.

¹⁸ The sects, the Cao Dai, the Hoa Hao, and the criminal Binh Xuyen, had been a challenge to Diem's political legitimacy right from the beginning of his government. Fall, *The Two Vietnams*, second edition, p. 239. For these sects not only had access to a bounty of arms and soldiers willing to fight in their hire, but also, at least in the case of the Binh Xuyen, they had purchased officials and police in Saigon. Dennis J. Duncanson, *Government and Revolution In Vietnam*, (London: Oxford University Press, [Issued under the Auspices of the Royal Institute of International Affairs], 1968), pp. 220 - 221. "Diem's status with the sects was not that of a national leader but that of an irritating and, unless checked, potentially dangerous rival. Le Van Vien (alias Bay Vien) knew that moralist Diem was unlikely to be tempted to accept a share of the profits from the activities of the 1,200 young ladies who offered their services at the Hall of Mirrors. General Soai and his followers and the Cao Dai also understood that the chance to dip their hands into the French cornucopia was rapidly coming to an end and that they would need to move fast to establish other claims." Warner, *The Last Confucian*, p. 98.

Diem's victory over the sects was, by no means imaginable, a foregone conclusion. For, by March of 1955, with the loyalty of the army still in question (the fledgling ARVN), Bao Dai turned against Diem and sought to have Bay Vien replace him. Hammer, *A Death In November*, p. 71. Despite threats of a violent coup (Edward Geary Lansdale, *In The Midst of Wars: An American's Mission to Southeast Asia*, [New York, [NY]: Harper & Row, 1972], p. 258), Diem resisted those ambitions and even decided to challenge the Binh Xuyen's control over the police. He knew that "as a matter of both government integrity and his own survival, the police must be under his control." Anderson, "Point of No Return In Vietnam," p. 132.

Meanwhile, with the Cao Dai controlling the country west of Saigon, the Hoa Hao holding the southern delta, and the Binh Xuyen in charge of Saigon, the Viet Minh commanded large areas of South Vietnam where "Diem had nothing with which to enforce his authority." Warner, *The Last Confucian*, p. 99.

¹⁹ Duncanson, *Government and Revolution In Vietnam*, p. 252.

²⁰ Understanding terror and how it can be used effectively is to comprehend, perhaps, the most salient foundation stone of Communist insurrection. Mao was right when he noted that power came from out of the barrel of a gun, but he neglected to refine this philosophy any further to the fact that Communist political legitimacy was founded on terror. Terror has several facets and can be manifested in a variety of ways but political/military terror has a specific purpose in its application. The pre-eminent military historian and thinker, JFC Fuller, first duly noted this purpose. In formulating the foundations of what became known as 'Blitzkrieg' Fuller had described the precise military benefits of terror in what he described as 'strategic paralysis.' Carefully selected targets, attacked and destroyed, transmitted the psychological phenomenon of

elections was a convenient propaganda tool for the Communists as they increased the pressure on the Diem government in the form of ever-escalating terror:

There was no period when selective assassination of village authorities, incautious about concealing their antipathy to the DRV, ceased to occur frequently; but after Ngo Dinh Diem repudiated demands for all-Vietnam elections, the rate at which murders were committed (hardly ever humanely) seems to have increased faster; although the Government's limited administrative control obscured much of what was going on, it is now generally thought that during the nine years that Diem was in power close on 20,000 people lost their lives in this way - the equivalent of an annual murder in every administrative village.²¹

Sir Robert Thompson noted that the published figures for murders and abductions, that were part of the Communist insurgents' terror campaign, exceeded 12,000 civilians and government workers for the one year period between 1960 and 1961.²² But what had really prompted the terror campaign was the fact that Diem's government had been so successful in bringing about a

paralysing terror wherein large groups of people, soldiers or civilians, are rendered incapable of organising resistance, at least, in the short term. Thus, for a very low expenditure in resources and wastage of human life, a great number of potential adversaries could be knocked-out without destroying them. To facilitate this transmission of paralysis, Fuller advocated that armies must attempt to destroy their opponents command and control centres (what he called a blow to the brains of the body) while leaving the actual communication links between units untouched in order to spread the terror of rumours, false orders, etc., all the faster. All that the Communists did, when down-sizing this kind of direct military strategic paralysis for civilian insurrectionist use, was to target key-government employees in the villages and hamlets and make sure that their horrific demise was transmitted to all the surrounding areas so that everyone got the message and was, thus, rendered helpless in supporting the government (it also helped if this terror seemed to have no method so as to appear as if a strike by lightning - so that no-one could feel safe in a pattern of non-commitment). This was an intelligent, cost-effective, and cold-blooded way of destroying the bonds between the incumbent government and the people in the field, it was also completely beyond the pale of moral restraint as it moved outside the areas prescribed by international laws in dealing with non-combatants in a time of war. This Communist insurrectionist strategy drew non-combatants into the line of fire in more ways than one, not least of these being the simple fact that government troops would eventually grow tired and angry at the constant sullen responses they got when interrogating civilians in the villages and hamlets about the presence of insurgents (remembering that these villagers were being sullen and quiet because they had just witnessed the disembowelling of a village chief or even a relative and they did not relish the same fate for themselves). Government troop reprisals against civilians would eventually occur which would then allow the Communist insurgents to take on the new found role of protector of the oppressed peasant. The civilian was clearly marked as the cannon fodder for this kind of deliberate action-reaction terror campaign provoked by the Communists.

²¹ Duncanson, *Government and Revolution in Vietnam*, p. 252.

²² Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency*, p. 27.

relative sense of peace and stability in rural South Vietnam during the three-year period after 1955. Another British counter-insurgency expert, P.J. Honey, who was attached to Robert Thompson's advisory mission to President Diem, had made a precise note of this:

*The country has enjoyed three years of relative peace and calm in which it has been able to carry on the very necessary work of national reconstruction. The most destructive feature in the national life of Vietnam throughout recent years has been the lack of security in the countryside, which obliged farmers and peasants to abandon the rice-fields and to flee to the large cities for safety and security forces have mopped up most of the armed bands of political opponents of the Government, of Communists and of common bandits.*²³

The Purpose of the Terror Campaign:

The purpose of the terror, then, was not to seek retribution for the failed elections (as some have tried to argue) as, in fact, the Communists in the North were in no position to hold such elections,²⁴ but, instead, its purpose was to break the growing bonds between the people and

²³ Congress, House, Committee on Armed Services, *Rebellion Against My-Diem, Evolution of the War - Origins of the Insurgency, 1954 - 1960* in *United States-Vietnam Relations: 1945-1967*, IV. A., 5. Tab 2., Book 2 of 12, Study Prepared by the Department of Defense, Leslie H. Gelb, Chairman OSD Task Force, 92nd Cong., 1st sess., (Washington, [DC]: United States

Government Printing Office, 1971), p. 46.

²⁴ Edward Geary Lansdale had predicted just prior to when the plebiscite for the 1956 elections was to be held that the North, itself, would probably find a convenient way around the process and blame the South for ruining the agreement - because they had serious political problems, of their own making, in North Vietnam. In a concise manner, Lansdale informed John Foster Dulles that the Hanoi officials had destroyed much good-will and positive public opinion in the North through their brutal and inept attempts at land-reform: "The Communist land reform program had been carried out in too radical a fashion, too abruptly, with even small family farms taken away from the owners and handed over not to the poor, but to the village never-do-wells, beggars, and the indolent. Apparently the thought was that when they failed at farming, the farms then could be impounded by the state as idle land and be made into collectivised state farms. Rural sections of North Vietnam were in revolt, especially in Ho Chi Minh's home province of Hghe An where troops were called in to re-establish governmental control." Lansdale, *In The Midst of Wars*, p. 346.

Perhaps, the most thorough-going examination of the land-reform bungling which led to open revolt in the North was rendered by Professor Pike in his book on *The History of Vietnamese Communism, 1925-1976*, pp. 108 - 113.

In addition to land-reform excesses and brutalities, the Ho Chi Minh regime was hardly in a position to be accusing Diem's government of Geneva Accords violations as, indeed, the Communists had been involved in several serious violations not least of which included the fact that they had been building up the offensive capabilities of their armies: "The United Kingdom had cited in 1956 an increase in the DRV armed forces from 7 to 20 divisions and evoked the 1958

the Government of South Vietnam.²⁵ This terror, in turn, would bring about strategic paralysis in the governing of South Vietnam as the Communists hoped that the people would be paralysed, through fear, from taking action in support of the GVN. In essence, it was the beginning of an all out effort to destroy the legitimacy of Ngo Dinh Diem and his government.²⁶ While this attack on the political and moral legitimacy of the Diem government was already underway at the tactical, village level in South Vietnam,²⁷ in May of 1959, at the fifteenth plenum of the Communist Central Committee, the leaders of North Vietnam made the formal decision to strategically direct the entire insurgency campaign in the South. The North Vietnamese Communist leadership had a number of options to consider in undertaking this action, as author William R. Andrews noted:

By 1956, the strength of President Ngo Dinh Diem's political base and the apparent economic progress in South Viet-Nam made the likelihood of the fledgling Government folding upon itself remote. After 1956, it seemed that only force could unite the two halves of Viet-Nam.

A conventional attack by Ho Chi Minh's People's Army of Viet-Nam patterned after the invasion of South Korea probably would have succeeded because the Army of the Republic of Viet-Nam was weak and fragmented, but two factors mitigated against such a move: world opinion and the alternative means possessed by the Lao Dong to destroy the South Vietnamese Government...The alternative means possessed by the Dang Lao Dong bypassed the difficulties of

denunciation of the French Minister of Foreign Affairs for the DRV's increasing its military strength from a 1954 total of 200,000 to 550,000. The White Paper castigated Hanoi for 'introducing 600 to 700 Chinese instructors' and noted that 'the number of Russian and Chinese advisors amounts to several thousand in all echelons of the Army.' Congress, House, Committee on Armed Services, *Failure of the Geneva Settlement, Evolution of the War - Origins of the Insurgency, 1954 - 1960*, in *United States-Vietnam Relations: 1945-1967*, IV. A. 5. Tab 1. Book 2 of 12, Study Prepared by the Department of Defense, Leslie H. Gelb, Chairman OSD Task Force, 92nd Cong., 1st sess., (Washington, [DC]: United States Government Printing Office, 1971), pp. 29 – 30.

²⁵ Andrews, *The Village War*, p. 20.

²⁶ "Disorientation is the objective par excellence of the terrorist removing the underpinnings of the order in which his targets live out their daily lives. The primary responsibility of any incumbent group is to guarantee order to its population, and the terrorist will attempt to disorient the population by demonstrating that the incumbent's structure cannot give adequate support." Thomas Perry Thorton, "Terror As A Weapon of Political Agitation," in *Internal War: Problems and Approaches*, Harry Eckstein, ed., (New York, [NY]: The Free Press, 1968), p. 83.

²⁷ This argument is also supported by RAND studies; see Stephen T. Hosmer's, *Viet Cong Repression and Its Implications For The Future*, R-475/1-ARPA - A Report prepared for the Advanced Research Projects Agency, (Santa Monica, [Calif.]: The Rand Corporation, 1970), p. 7 - 8.

*conventional military action; that means was revolutionary guerrilla warfare. Conditions in South Viet-Nam, no matter how improved, were advantageous for such an undertaking.*²⁸

Target for Terror: GVN Progress in Rural South Vietnam

William Colby's observations on the progress that Diem had made support the argument that the Communists had little choice but to attack with political terror and violence if they were not to lose the South but, potentially, the North as well. Colby noted that the Communists were well aware of the fact that their campaign to win the people over was going nowhere in the face of the GVN's programs to rebuild the basic rural infrastructure of the South. He called what the Diem government was managing to do, between the years of 1956 to 1959, "...the total social and economic regeneration of South Vietnam." Villages that had been abandoned during the Viet Minh war were re-populated and new schools were being built in rapid order. For example, Colby noted that in one particular province that he visited, at the end of the Viet Minh war, there had only been two or three schools, all in the province capital, however, by the spring of 1959 there were approximately forty new schools spread throughout the province.²⁹ As such, these were practical and, thus, powerful indicators to the ordinary Vietnamese peasant that Diem had their

²⁸ Andrews, *The Village War*, pp. 20 – 21.

²⁹ "...he (Diem) consolidated his position by about 1956 and was engaged in a very vigorous economic and social development program at that point, which was proving quite successful (page #: 1)certainly the communists weren't going anywhere. They may have gone up to the North and said, "If you don't do something, we are dead." Because what was really happening was the total social and economic regeneration of South Vietnam. That's what happened between 1956 and 1959. I went to little schools out in the country being dedicated down in the swamps of Ca Mau. This one, I remember doing it, it was way out along the canal and they were dedicating this new school...But the interesting thing about it was I asked about this little village where the school was. Well, the village had been evacuated during the period of the war and in about 1952 or 1953 had been just evacuated and everybody gone. About 1957 or 1958 they had re-established the village and people had moved back to it. Then with the government program of assistance to schools and training of teachers, they were re-establishing this school in this little village. It was way out, ten miles, fifteen miles something, far from the provincial capital. I went to the provincial capital, to the office of education there, after having been there and looked at their map. You know, they had a comparative map of the number of schools they had in 1954, which was about two or three, all in the capital or the district capitals, and the number of schools they had in 1959 – this was in the spring of 1959 – which was in the order of thirty or forty in the province. Now, that had happened." William Colby, "William E. Colby on Vietnam, Interview I." Recorded interview by Ted Gittinger, (June 2, 1981), pp. 1, 7 & 8, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Oral History Program, University of Texas at Austin.

best interests at the forefront of his focus on rebuilding the country. They were also powerful indicators to the Communists that their campaign was finished unless they somehow could break the people from the GVN.³⁰ He had come to believe that the Communists were left without a hope of assuming political leadership and authority in South Vietnam unless they turned, yet again, to violence and insurgency. In this context, then, Colby told his interviewer that he had personally verified this regeneration that was so devastating to the Communists:

The time for substantial Northern assistance for the stay-behind cadres in the South was at hand and it became manifest to most observers that by 1960 the Viet Minh were embarking upon another major war, the political target being Ngo Dinh Diem who was more assailable through the Americans than the Vietnamese.³¹

Diem's Usurping of the Communist Political Infrastructure in the Villages of South Vietnam -

The orthodox claims, vis-à-vis land reform and, particularly, Diem's interference in village democracy, were nothing much more than pat explanations that simply were not commensurate with the reality of who Ngo Dinh Diem was and the depth of his near-obsession with land-reform.³² Anyone who knew anything about the background of Ngo Dinh Diem, as a

³⁰ Edward Geary Lansdale's observations about what faced the Communists correspond, precisely, to the Colby analysis. "Paradoxically, the Communist campaign of terrorism started just as life in the countryside was beginning to show great promise for the people on the land. It wasn't only that the armies had departed from the former battlegrounds in the rice paddies, letting farmlands be tilled in peace; there were, as well, a multitude of new efforts being made to improve the whole agrarian economy of Vietnam. Each time that I visited President Diem in his office, I would find him deep in the study of some new program, often of vast dimensions..." Lansdale, *In The Midst of Wars*, p. 354.

³¹ Warner, *The Last Confucian*, p. 146.

³² "One of the actualities was the development of the trans-Bassac region, the land between the Bassac branch of the Mekong River and the Gulf of Thailand. The first phase called for settling over a hundred thousand people in new model farm communities in the Cai Sab area and draining the low-lying land by constructing 125 miles of navigable canals. Model villages and canals were constructed mostly by hand labor....The settlements were planned to sandwich a community of refugees from the North between similar communities of farmers from the South, alternating northerners and southerners throughout the region in a cultural melting pot that hopefully would give each equal opportunity.

village and later province chief, knew that he was most at home attending to the small details of peasant and village life. His reputation as a Vietnamese nationalist was built upon this understanding. Relatedly, the criticism levelled at him, by scholars and journalists like Bernard B. Fall – that he had foolishly destroyed the natural democracy of the village elections, becomes preposterous in the face of the facts. These facts, which constituted political reality in South Vietnam, dictated that prior to Diem’s attempts to affect Government control in the villages, the Communist stay-behind cadres had already been hard at work thus necessitating the GVN’s interference.³³

Here, then, is the standard explanation of Diem’s alleged anti-democratic maladministration as put forward by the orthodox school’s Bernard B. Fall, but also adhered to by a few non-orthodox historians including such authors as Larry Cable:³⁴

“And in June, 1956, the South Vietnamese government made perhaps its most fateful decision. In defiance of one of the most hallowed Vietnamese traditions, according to which the power of the central authorities stops at the bamboo hedge of the village, the Saigon administration abolished by a stroke of the pen

Diem also was full of enthusiasm for new crops. Under his guidance, floating rice was grown in huge experimental plots along the Vaico River where seasonal flooding turned the lowlands into vast bogs, and communities of northern refugees located in foothills of the Vietnam cordillera were urged to grow kenaf, whose fiber could be woven into bags for sugar....Wolf Ladejinsky, the American land reform expert, had left his position with the U.S. government at the time, and Diem immediately employed him. The two men became close friends in 1956, and Ladejinsky was given a house next to the presidential palace and joined Diem at breakfast nearly every morning. Thus Diem’s daily routine began with these breakfast sessions, discussing the implementation of the land reform measures drafted by Ladejinsky and issued as decrees by Diem, as well as the myriad problems of the whole range of agricultural projects afoot. Both men shared the dream of making an Eden of Vietnam, with bounty for all its inhabitants and with ample foods for other nations in the Pacific basin.” Lansdale, *In The Midst of Wars*, pp. 354 –356.

³³ Bernard B. Fall, *Last Reflections On A War: Bernard B. Fall's Last Comments on Vietnam*, (Garden City, [NY]: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1967), pp. 198 – 199.

³⁴ “Unfortunately, Lansdale and the Americans did not prevent their new protégé from committing a massive and egregious error in 1956, when he prohibited the traditional and deeply cherished village elections and instead appointed as village chiefs fellow Catholic refugees from the North. This was a blunder which even the French and the Japanese had not committed during their terms as occupiers of Vietnam. It was a cause of massive discontent among the rural population of South Vietnam.” Larry E. Cable, *Conflict of Myths: The Development of American Counterinsurgency Doctrine and the Vietnam War*, (New York, [NY]: New York University Press, 1986), p. 185.

*elected village chiefs and village councils and replaced them by appointive members.”*³⁵

What Fall and Cable neglected to mention was the fact that Diem was trying to short-circuit the Communist influence in the villages. This was an influence which, of course, made elections at the best, irrelevant and, at the worst, useful Communist propaganda. Fall tried to claim that even the Communists in the North had not been so stupid as to attempt to interfere with the villages. Yet, this explanation studiously ignores the fact that there had been massive rebellions against Ho Chi Minh’s ‘land-reform’ (i.e., Stalinist collectivisation) in the villages in Northern Vietnam during 1956. Indeed, the Northern rebellion was so out of control that Ho sent in the army with the result that approximately 10,000 Vietnamese peasants lost their lives.³⁶ Lansdale stated that the Communist officials who were adept at running guerrilla war proved to be terrible bunglers in running the Hanoi government.³⁷ In fact, Lansdale claims that the Northern Communists were so unpopular at this time that they would have been soundly defeated by Diem had the 1956 plebiscite/reunification elections been held – as prescribed by the original 1954 agreements in Geneva. Here, in his words, is the Lansdale argument:

The Communist officials who had waged a successful war against the French were terrible bunglers at running a government. Their stock with the public in North Vietnam was so abysmally low that they wouldn’t dare put it to a vote, let alone chance a contest against Diem, whose popularity was at a peak. (Diem’s landslide victory over Bao Dai at the polls wasn’t lost on Hanoi’s leaders.) I felt certain that the Communist leaders, while declaiming loudly about holding a plebiscite, would do everything they could to postpone it. ... On top of earning all this resentment in the rural areas, the Hanoi regime had also managed to be maladroit with its most prized asset, the youth. Revolt was stirring at the University of Hanoi, where students were demanding relief from the heavy input of political indoctrination in all their lectures. Students complained that their instructors skimmed even highly technical subjects in favor of long dissertations on dialectical materialism. Much of the same thing was happening in the high schools of North Vietnam. ... For these reasons I felt that the Communist leaders in Hanoi would discreetly inform the Soviets (co-sponsors of the 1954 Geneva

³⁵ Fall, [*Last Reflections On A War*](#), pp. 198 – 199.

³⁶ Lansdale, [*In The Midst of Wars*](#), p. 346.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 345.

accords) to go slow on pressing for a plebiscite in any meeting with the British (the other Geneva co-sponsor).³⁸

Further to all of these claims by Lansdale, which the orthodox school deliberately ignores or makes light of, Bernard Fall admits that there had been a substantial stay-behind Communist organisation in the South but then he fails to ascribe any thorough going revolutionary capabilities to them.³⁹ In short, there is no explanation given in the orthodox interpretation vis-à-vis the threat that these Communists posed to Diem's GVN nor is there any consideration given to how he was supposed to deal with such a threat.

The fact was that Diem's interference at the village level was necessary and it eventually translated into the Strategic Hamlets Program wherein village or hamlet elections were encouraged by the GVN because the protected peasant communities were no longer subject to the intimidation of the Communists. In effect, the orthodox historians set Diem up in order to knock him down while studiously ignoring all the facts that were pertinent to the context of Communist insurgency in the villages.⁴⁰

The Communist strategy, Colby surmised, was anything but a traditional war-fighting direction. The CIA Saigon station-chief intuited that what they were really looking at was the beginning of "people's war" in 1960. Certainly, he recognised all the telltale indicators of the first stage of "people's war" as the mobilisation and organisation of insurgent Communist forces was clearly under way.⁴¹ The real battle ground, that Colby noted, was the same one that Sir Robert

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 345 – 347.

³⁹ Fall, *Last Reflections On A War*, p. 198.

⁴⁰ Robert Thompson, however, did not ignore what Diem said or did in this context and he supported the Vietnamese President in his attempts to purge Communist control from the villages. Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency*, pp. 78 – 79.

⁴¹ "In the first place, it seemed obvious to me that the Communist strategy was anything but a traditional war. Vo Nguyen Giap, Hanoi's military genius, had written of how he had fought the "people's war" in North Vietnam and, although its culmination was in the set-piece battle of Dien-Bien Phu, it had begun just as it was beginning now in South Vietnam in 1960. Clearly, this was the first stage of the "people's war," the mobilization and organization of the forces with which to fight." *Ibid.*, pp. 161 – 170.

Thompson had drawn attention to in his now famous statement that it was a struggle for “the hearts and the minds of the people;” and, again, Thompson made this fundamental understanding plain when he stated that “An insurgent movement is a war for the people.”⁴² Indeed, the similarities between how both Colby and Thompson viewed the nature of the struggle were remarkable. Accordingly, the following excerpt from Colby’s writing on this issue would find immediate recognition and support (and vice versa) in Thompson’s seminal work on the subject, *Defeating Communist Insurgency: Experiences From Malaya and Vietnam*. Any way one chooses to peruse the following, while written by Colby it could have as easily been the work of Thompson:

*The real contest, it seemed to me, was in the villages, where the issues were more fundamental. Did association with the Saigon government offer a better future, both economic and political, for the villager? Or did the national and revolutionary appeal of the Communist organizer, reinforced by the authority of guerrilla squads, convince the villager or leave him no alternative but to join the revolt? My travels in the countryside had shown how wide was the gap between the French-influenced urban class and the traditional Vietnamese villager. But it had also shown the latter’s enthusiastic acceptance of economic and social development and his willingness to work hard toward it. In the long term, villagers would certainly insist on more of a voice in their national affairs, even along the lines advocated by the oppositionists in Saigon, but in the near term, they were far more interested in the practical improvements that could be made in their lives and in the life-and-death issue of protection from the armed bands circulating in their regions. Thus, the real way to contest the Communists, it seemed to me, would be to mobilize, organize and involve the villagers in the economic and social improvements that the government was providing and to strengthen them so that they could help defend themselves against Communist pressures. The question was which side they would join, and whether they would be free to join the government’s if they wanted to. The answer, I was convinced, would be found only in the villages, not in the political circles in Saigon or in General Staff Headquarters.*⁴³

With reference to Colby’s analysis, Thompson made a specific effort in pointing out that the government could win over the people without being a Western-styled democracy. He

⁴² Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency*, p. 51.

⁴³ Colby, *Honorable Men*, pp. 161-170.

believed, and with a considerable wealth of experience to intelligently support such belief, that an authoritarian government which applied the rule of law equally to all while, at the same time, engaging in constructive and progressive national policies, very much like what Diem had done, could win the people over. What was required of the government was that it firmly establish in the peoples' minds that legality, plus construction, plus results are what flowed from the government while, conversely, illegality, plus destruction, plus empty promises equalled what the Communist insurgency could be summed up as.⁴⁴

The very fact that a Communist insurgency had begun to spread through rural South Vietnam in the late 1950's caused many Americans to take a critical view of Diem. By 1960, American experience with Ngo Dinh Diem and the GVN had created much controversy in Washington and this was a controversy that would not go away. To many American liberal Democrats, Diem was an enigma and one that they suspected was unsympathetic to their secular liberal-humanist worldview. The discerning student will be able to detect between the lines of what men like Averell Harriman and John Galbraith said and wrote about Diem and his brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, a subtle but definite partisan or political-philosophical distaste. This distaste blossomed without restraint into a very definite hatred of Ngo Dinh Diem and his brother; yet, irrational though it was this hatred was couched in the finest politically correct reserve and wording that Kennedy's 'best and brightest' could very adroitly bring to bear.

The "Destruction of the Oppression," in the final analysis was effective but not for the usual reasons for which one would expect such a terror campaign to be effective but, instead, for some very unique and unusual developments; – such as the fact that the terror coincided with enormous political pressure being applied to Diem from a certain group within Kennedy's Administration. With the table being constantly pounded vis-à-vis democratic reforms in the rural villages how could Diem provide the structure, effectively, to defeat the Viet Cong penetrations therein? How could there be security when he was being ordered to open things up?

⁴⁴ Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency*, p. 68.