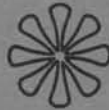


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# UNITED STATES - VIETNAM RELATIONS

## 1945 - 1967



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IV. B. 2.

EVOLUTION OF THE WAR

Strategic Hamlet Program

1961 - 1963

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IV.B.2.

STRATEGIC HAMLET PROGRAM

1961 - 1963

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

A specific strategy by which the U.S. and GVN would attempt to end the insurgency in South Vietnam had never been agreed upon at the time that the U.S. decided, late in 1961, to increase materially its assistance to GVN and to expand its advisory effort into one which would implement a "limited partnership." By early 1962, however, there was apparent consensus among the principal participants that the Strategic Hamlet Program, as it came to be called, represented the unifying concept for a strategy designed to pacify rural Vietnam (the Viet Cong's chosen battleground) and to develop support among the peasants for the central government.

The Strategic Hamlet Program was much broader than the construction of strategic hamlets per se. It envisioned sequential phases which, beginning with clearing the insurgents from an area and protecting the rural populace, progressed through the establishment of GVN infrastructure and thence to the provision of services which would lead the peasants to identify with their government. The strategic hamlet program was, in short, an attempt to translate the newly articulated theory of counter-insurgency into operational reality. The objective was political though the means to its realization were a mixture of military, social, psychological, economic and political measures.

The effect of these sequential steps to pacification was to make it very difficult to make intermediate assessments of progress. One could not really be sure how one was doing until one was done. Physical security by itself (the so-called "clear and hold" initial step) was a necessary condition for pacification, not a sufficient one. The establishment of governmental functions was not, by itself, necessarily conducive to a successful effort; the quality of those functions and their responsiveness to locally felt needs was critical. This inherent difficulty in assessing progress did not simply mean that it was difficult to identify problems and to make improvements as one went along -- which it was. It also meant that it was quite possible to conclude that the program as a whole was progressing well (or badly) according to evidence relating only to a single phase or a part of a phase.

A related problem arose from the uniqueness of this program in American experience -- pacification by proxy. The theory of sequential

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phases could be variously interpreted. This is not the problem of the three blind men describing the elephant; it is the problem of men with different perspectives each moulding his own conception of a proper body to the same skeleton. If the final product were to have some semblance of coherence and mutual satisfaction it was necessary that the shapers came to agreement on substance and operational procedure, not just that they agree on the proper skeleton upon which to work.

The problem with the apparent consensus which emerged early in 1962 was that the principal participants did view it with different perspectives and expectations. On the U.S. side, military advisors had a set of preferences which affected their approach to the Strategic Hamlet Program. They wanted to make RVNAF more mobile, more aggressive, and better organized to take the offensive against the Viet Cong. They were, consequently, extremely leery of proposals which might lead it to be tied down in strategic defenses ("holding" after "clearing" had been completed) or diverted too much to military civic action undertakings.

The American political leadership, insofar as a generalization may be attempted, may be said to have been most concerned with the later phases of the program -- those in which GVN services were provided, local governments established, and the economy bolstered. Military clearing operations were, to them, a distasteful, expensive, but necessary precondition to the really critical and important phases of the effort.

Both of these U.S. groups had perspectives different from those of the Diem administration. In the U.S. view the insurgents were only one of Diem's enemies; he himself was the other. In this view the process of pacification could proceed successfully only if Diem reformed his own government. It was precisely to achieve these goals simultaneously that the U.S. agreed to enter a "limited partnership" with GVN in the counter-insurgent effort. The Strategic Hamlet Program became the operational symbol of this effort.

President Diem -- unsurprisingly -- had a very different view. His need, as he saw it, was to get the U.S. committed to South Vietnam (and to his administration) without surrendering his independence. He knew that his nation would fall without U.S. support; he feared that his government would fall if he either appeared to toady to U.S. wishes or allowed any single group too much potential power -- particularly coercive power. The Strategic Hamlet Program offered a vehicle by which he could direct the counterinsurgent effort as he thought it should be directed and without giving up either his prerogatives to the U.S. or his mantle to his restless generals.

The program, in the form of a plan for pacification of the Delta, was formally proposed to Diem in November 1961 by R. G. K. Thompson, head of the newly arrived British Advisory Mission. U.S. military

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advisors favored at that time an ARVN penetration of the VC redoubt in War Zone D prior to any operations aimed specifically at pacification. But U.S. political desires to start some local operation which could achieve concrete gains combined with Diem's preference for a pacification effort in an area of strategic importance led to the initial effort in March 1962, "Operation SUNRISE," in Binh Duong Province north of Saigon. This was a heavily VC-infiltrated area rather than one of minimal penetration, as Thompson had urged. But planning -- as distinct from operations -- continued on the Delta plan and strategic hamlets were constructed in a variegated, uncoordinated pattern throughout the spring and early summer. The U.S. had little or no influence over these activities; the primary impetus was traceable directly to the President's brother and political counsellor, Ngo Dinh Nhu.

In August 1962, GVN produced its long awaited national pacification plan with four priority areas and specified priorities within each area. At the same time, however, it indicated that over 2,500 strategic hamlets had already been completed and that work was already underway on more than 2,500 more. Although it was not until October 1962, that GVN explicitly announced the Strategic Hamlet Program to be the unifying concept of its pacification and counterinsurgent effort it was clear earlier that the program had assumed this central position.

Three important implications of this early progress (or, more precisely, reported progress) are also clear in retrospect. These implications seem not to have impressed themselves acutely upon U.S. observers at the time. First, the program was truly one of GVN initiative rather than one embodying priorities and time phasing recommended by the U.S. Diem was running with his own ball in programmatic terms, no matter who articulated the theory of the approach. The geographic dispersion of hamlets already reported to be completed indicated that there was, in fact, a conscious effort to implement this phase almost simultaneously throughout the entire nation rather than to build slowly as Diem's foreign advisors (both U.S. and British) recommended.

Finally, the physical aspects of Diem's program were similar if not identical to earlier population resettlement and control efforts practiced by the French and by Diem. The long history of these efforts was marked by consistency in results as well as in techniques: all failed dismally because they ran into resentment if not active resistance on the part of the peasants at whose control and safety, then loyalty, they were aimed. U.S. desires to begin an effective process of pacification had fastened onto security as a necessary precondition and slighted the historic record of rural resistance to resettlement. President Diem and his brother, for their part, had decided to emphasize control of the rural population as the precondition to winning loyalty. The record is inconclusive with respect to their weighing the record of the past but it appears that they, too, paid it scant attention. Thus the early operational efforts indicated a danger of peasant resistance, on one hand,



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and of divergent approaches between, in the initial steps, the U.S. (focused on security measures) and Diem (concerned more with control measures). Since the physical actions to achieve security and those to impose control are in many respects the same, there was generated yet another area in which assessments of progress would be inconclusive and difficult to make.

U.S. attention, once an apparent consensus had been forged concentrated on program management efforts in two categories: to convince GVN to proceed at a more measured, coherent pace with a qualitative improvement in the physical construction of strategic hamlets; and to schedule material assistance (fortification materials, etc.) and training for local defense forces to match the rate of desired hamlet construction.

U.S. assessments, at the same time, concentrated on the physical aspects of the program and on VC activity in areas where strategic hamlets had been constructed. Assessments tended to be favorable from a security (or control) viewpoint and uneven with respect to political development. The general conclusion was almost always one of cautious optimism when security (control) was emphasized, one of hopeful pessimism when political follow-up was stressed. The impression in Washington was typically slanted toward the more optimistic appraisals if for no other reason than that hamlet construction and security arrangements were the first chronological steps in the long process to pacification. Was it not, after all, "progress" to have moved from doing nothing to doing something even though the something was being done imperfectly?

These U.S. assessments changed only marginally throughout the life of the program. By the time, in 1963, that the hopeful pessimist voices were clearer, it was also much clearer that the Ngo brothers had made the Strategic Hamlet Program into one closely identified with their regime and with Diem's rather esoterically phrased "personalist revolution." Fears grew that Diem was attempting to impose loyalty from the top through control rather than to build it from the bottom by deeds. These fears were not limited to the Strategic Hamlet Program, however; they extended to urban as well as rural phases of South Vietnamese life and were subsumed, as the Buddhist question moved to the fore, by the general issue of the viability of Diem's regime.

President Diem grew increasingly unwilling to meet U.S. demands for reform. He believed that to do so would cause his government to fail. U.S. observers held that failure to do so would cause the nation, not just the government to fall. In the event the government fell and the nation's counterinsurgent program took a definite turn for the worse, but the nation did not fall. The Strategic Hamlet Program did. Closely identified with the Ngo brothers, it was almost bound to suffer their fortunes; when they died it died, too. The new government of generals, presumably realizing the extent of peasant displeasure with resettlement and control measures, did nothing to save it.

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A number of contributory reasons can be cited for the failure of the Strategic Hamlet Program. Over-expansion of construction and poor quality of defenses forms one category. This reason concentrates only on the initial phase of the program, however. While valid, it does little to explain why the entire program collapsed rather than only some hamlets within it. Rural antagonisms which identified the program with its sponsors in the central government are more suggestive of the basis for the complete collapse as Diem and Nhu departed the scene. The reasons why they departed are traceable in part to the different expectations which combined in the apparent consensus at the program's beginning: to Diem's insistence on material assistance and independence, to U.S. willingness to provide assistance only if its advice was heeded, and to the failure to resolve this question either by persuasion or leverage.

Having said this, it does not automatically follow that the program would have succeeded even if Diem had met U.S. demands for change. To point to the causes of failure is one thing; to assume that changes of style would have led to success is quite another. It may well be that the program was doomed from the outset because of peasant resistance to measures which changed the pattern of rural life --- whether aimed at security or control. It might have been possible, on the other hand, for a well-executed program eventually to have achieved some measure of success. The early demise of the program does not permit a conclusive evaluation. The weight of evidence suggests that the Strategic Hamlet Program was fatally flawed in its conception by the unintended consequence of alienating many of those whose loyalty it aimed to win.

This inconclusive finding, in turn, suggests that the sequential phases embodied in the doctrine of counterinsurgency may slight some very important problem areas. The evidence is not sufficient for an indictment; still less is one able to validate the counterinsurgent doctrine with reference to a program that failed. The only verdict that may be given at this time with respect to the validity of the doctrine is that used by Scots courts -- "case not proved."

CHRONOLOGY

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IV.B.2.

CHRONOLOGY

<u>DATE</u>	<u>OCCURRENCE</u>
1953-1959	French and GVN early attempts at population resettlement into defended communities to create secure zones.
1959	Rural Community Development Centers (Agroville) Program initiated by GVN.
Late 1960	USMAAG <u>Counterinsurgency Plan Vietnam</u> completed.
Early 1961	Agroville Program modified by construction of "Agro-Hamlets" to meet peasant objections.
May 1961	Vice President Johnson's visit to RVN.
July 1961	Staley Group report on increased economic aid and increase in RVNAF strength.
15 September 1961	USMAAG <u>Geographically Phased National Level Operation Plan for Counterinsurgency</u> .
18 October 1961	General Taylor arrives in RVN; President Diem declares national emergency.
27 October 1961	R.G.K. Thompson submits to President Diem his <u>Appreciation of Vietnam, November 1961-April 1962</u> .
3 November 1961	General Taylor submits his report and recommendations to President Kennedy.
13 November 1961	R.G.K. Thompson submits his draft plan for pacification of the Delta to President Diem.
15 November 1961	NSC drafts NSAM 111. Cable to Ambassador Nolting, instructing him to meet with Diem, lays out proposed U.S. assistance and expected GVN effort.
22 November 1961	NSAM 111.
15 December 1961	First Secretary of Defense Conference, Honolulu.
2 February 1962	Roger Hilsman's <u>A Strategic Concept for South Vietnam</u> .
3 February 1962	Diem creates Inter-Ministerial Committee on Strategic Hamlets.



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<u>DATE</u>	<u>OCCURRENCE</u>
19 March 1962	Diem approves Thompson's "Delta Plan" for execution.
22 March 1962	"Operation SUNRISE" commences in Binh Duong Province.
8 August 1962	GVN National Strategic Hamlet Construction Plan.
28 October 1962	GVN devotes entire issue of <u>The Times of Vietnam</u> to "The Year of the Strategic Hamlet."
8 May 1962	Buddhist controversy erupts when GVN troops fire on demonstrators in Hue.
24 August 1963	State to Lodge, Message 243, says that U.S. can no longer tolerate Nhu's continuation in power.
10 September 1963	General Krulak and Mr. Mendenhall give contradictory reports on progress of war to KSC.
2 October 1963	Secretary McNamara reports to President Kennedy following his visit to RVN with General Taylor.
1 November 1963	Coup d'etat by group of generals against President Diem.



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THE STRATEGIC HAMLET PROGRAM

1961 - 1963

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IV.B.2.

THE STRATEGIC HAMLET PROGRAM, 1961-1963:

AN APPRAISAL

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Scope and Terminology

The Strategic Hamlet Program in the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) -- articulated and carried forward from late 1961 until late 1963 -- has created some confusion because of terminology. One source of confusion stems from the similarity between the physical aspects of the program and earlier fortified communities of one kind or another. Another source of confusion rises because of the loose usage of "hamlet" as compared to "village" and because of the practice of referring to these communities as "defended," "secure," and fortified" as well as "strategic." But the greatest source of confusion lies in the distinction between a strategic hamlet per se and the strategic hamlet program.

The hamlet is the smallest organized community in rural South Vietnam. Several hamlets (typically 3-5) comprise a village. During the strategic hamlet program both hamlets and villages were fortified. The distinction is unimportant for the present analysis, except as it bears on the defensibility of the community protected. The several adjectives coupled with hamlet or village were occasionally used to differentiate communities according to the extent of their defenses or the initial presumed loyalty of their inhabitants. More often no such distinction was made; the terms were used interchangeably. Where a distinction exists, the following account explains it.

The phrase Strategic Hamlet Program when used to represent the program is much broader than the phrase applied to the hamlets themselves. The program, as explained below, envisioned a process of pacification of which the construction of strategic hamlets was but part of one phase, albeit a very important part. This paper examines the program, not just the hamlets.

B. Antecedents

Population relocation into defended villages was by no means a recent development in Southeast Asia. Parts of South Vietnam had experience with the physical aspects of fortified communities going back many

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years. As the intellectual godfather of the Strategic Hamlet Program has put it, the concept's use as one of the measures to defeat communist insurgency "...has only meant that the lessons of the past had to be relearned." 1/

The administration of President Diem had relearned these lessons much earlier than late 1961. There was, in fact, no need to relearn them because they had never been forgotten. The French had made resettlement and the development of "secure zones" an important element in their effort near the end of the war with the Viet Minh. The government of newly-created South Vietnam, headed since 1954 by President Diem, had continued resettlement schemes to accommodate displaced persons, to control suspected rural populations, and to safeguard loyal peasants in the threatened areas. None of these efforts involving resettlement had succeeded. Each had inspired antagonism among the peasants who were moved from their ancestral lands and away from family burial plots.

Diem's actions in late 1961 were thus inescapably tied to earlier actions by proximity in time, place, and the personal experiences of many peasants. Chief among the earlier programs was that of the so-called Agrovilles or "Rural Community Development Centers," launched in 1959. The Agrovilles, groupments of 300-500 families, were designed to afford the peasantry the social benefits of city life (schools and services), to increase their physical security, and to control certain key locations by denying them to the communists. 2/ They were designed to improve simultaneously the security and well-being of their inhabitants and the government's control over the rural population and rural areas.

The Agrovillage program was generally unsuccessful. The peasants had many complaints about it ranging from clumsy, dishonest administration to the physical hardship of being too far from their fields and the psychological wrench of being separated from ancestral homes and burial plots. 3/ By 1960, President Diem had slowed the program in response to peasant complaints and the Viet Cong's ability to exploit this dissatisfaction. 4/

The transition from Agrovilles to strategic hamlets in 1961 was marked by the so-called "Agro-hamlet" which attempted to meet some of the peasants' objections:

The smaller 100 family Agro-hamlet was located more closely to lands tilled by the occupants. Construction was carried out at a slower pace fitted to the peasant's planting and harvesting schedule...By the end of 1961, the Agro-hamlet had become the prototype of a vast civil defense scheme known as strategic hamlets, Ap Chien Luoc. 5/

It was inevitable, given this lineage, that the strategic hamlet program be regarded by the peasants as old wine in newly-labelled bottles. The successes and failures of the past were bound to condition its acceptance-- and by late 1961 the Diem government was having more failures than successes.

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C. The Situation in Late 1961

By late 1961, if not earlier, it had become clear in both Saigon and Washington that the yellow star of the Viet Cong was in the ascendancy. Following the 1960 North Vietnamese announcement of the twin goals of ousting President Diem and reunifying Vietnam under communist rule, the Viet Cong began sharply to increase its guerrilla, subversive, and political warfare. 6/ Viet Cong regular forces, now estimated to have grown to 25,000, had been organized into larger formations and employed with increasing frequency. The terrorist-guerrilla organization had grown to an estimated 17,000 by November 1961. 7/ During the first half of 1961, terrorists and guerrillas had assassinated over 500 local officials and civilians, kidnapped more than 1,000, and killed almost 1,500 RVNAF personnel. 8/ The VC continued to hold the initiative in the countryside, controlling major portions of the populace and drawing an increasingly tight cinch around Saigon. 9/ The operative question was not whether the Diem government as it was then moving could defeat the insurgents, but whether it could save itself.

Much of this deterioration of the situation in RVN was attributable, in U.S. eyes, to the manner in which President Diem had organized his government. The struggle -- whether viewed as one to gain loyalty or simply to assert control -- was focused in and around the villages and hamlets in the countryside. It was precisely in those areas that the bilineal GVN organization (ARVN and civilian province chiefs) most lacked the capability for concerted and cohesive action. The Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) was developing a potentially effective institutional framework under U.S. tutelage, but that effectiveness against the VC, Diem realized, could potentially be transferred into effectiveness against himself. The abortive coup of late 1960 had made Diem even more reluctant than he had earlier been to permit power (especially coercive power) to be gathered into one set of hands other than his own. Still, the establishment of an effective military chain of command which could operate where necessary in the countryside remained the prime objective of U.S. military advisors. 10/

A unitary chain of command had recently been ordered into effect within ARVN, but this had not solved the operational problems, for military operations were inescapably conducted in areas under the control of an independent political organization with its own military forces and influence on operations of all kinds -- military, paramilitary, and civic action. The province chiefs, personally selected by President Diem and presumably loyal to him, controlled politically the territory in dispute with the VC and within which ARVN must operate. They also controlled territorial forces comprising the Civil Guard (CG) and Self Defense Corps (SDC).

For President Diem's purposes this bilineal organization offered an opportunity to counterbalance the power (and coup potential) of the generals by the power of the province chiefs. It was a device for survival. But the natural by-product of this duality, in terms of the effectiveness of actions against the VC, was poor coordination and imperfect cooperation

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in intelligence collection and production, in planning, and in operational execution in the countryside, where the battles were fought -- both the "battle for men's minds" and the more easily understood battles for control of the hamlets, villages, districts, and provinces.

The U.S. and GVN were agreed that in order to defeat the insurgency it was necessary that the rural populace identify with at least the local representatives of the central government. They were agreed, too, that some measure of physical security must be provided the rural population if this end were to be achieved. Both agreed that the GVN must be the principal agent to carry out the actions which would bring the insurgency to an end.

The high level U.S.-GVN discussions held during President Kennedy's first year in office focused on what the U.S. could provide GVN to assist the latter's counterinsurgency efforts and on what GVN should do organizationally to make its efforts more effective. A subsidiary and related discussion revolved around the U.S. advisory organization to parallel the GVN reorganization. The problem of how additional resources in some improved organizational framework were to be applied operationally was fragmented into many sub-issues ranging from securing the border to building social infrastructure.

The story of the Strategic Hamlet Program, as it came to be called, is one in which an operational concept specifying a sequence of concrete steps was introduced by an articulate advocate, nominally accepted by all of the principal actors, and advanced to a position of apparent centrality in which it became the operational blueprint for ending the insurgency. But it is also the story of an apparent consensus built on differing, sometimes competing, expectations and of an effort which was, in retrospect, doomed by the failure to resolve in one context the problem it was designed to alleviate in another -- the problem of GVN stability.

II. THE FORMULATION OF THE STRATEGIC HAMLET PROGRAM

A. U.S.-GVN Consultations

Beginning in May 1961, the U.S. and GVN conducted a series of high level conferences to fashion responses to the insurgent challenge. The first of these was the visit to Saigon by the Vice President, Lyndon B. Johnson. The Vice President's consultations were designed to reinforce the U.S. commitment to RVN and to improve the image of President Diem's government.

In a communique issued jointly in Saigon, it was agreed that the RVNAF was to be increased to 150,000 men, that the U.S. would support the entire Civil Guard with military assistance funds, that Vietnamese and U.S. military specialists would be used to support village-level health and public works activities, and that the two governments would "discuss

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new economic and social measures to be undertaken in rural areas to accompany the anti-guerrilla effort...." 11/ These discussions implied that more GVN effort should be devoted to rural pacification and civic action and acknowledged that more regular military forces were needed, but they did little to clarify the relationships of these parts to the whole or to an overall scheme by which the process would develop.

The Staley group, a joint economic and financial committee co-chaired by Dr. A. Eugene Staley, Stanford Research Institute, and Vu Quoc Tuc, GVN, followed much the same pattern. Meeting in Saigon in June 1961, the committee agreed that RVNAF strength should be increased to 200,000 during CY 1962 and that U.S. funding should be provided to various emergency economic and social programs. 12/ But the group did nothing to tie together the strands of what it recognized as the central problem: to achieve a simultaneous "breakthrough" on both the military-internal security front and the economic-social front. 13/ Its recommendations were restricted (in part, no doubt, because of its limited charter) to specific program increases and to a restatement of the dimensions of the problem.

The devastation caused by the September monsoonal floods (320,000 refugees, 1,000 kilometers of road destroyed, 10 million acres of rice and other crops lost), combined with the losses attributable to increased insurgent activity, led President Diem to declare a state of national emergency on 19 October 1961. This declaration coincided with the visit to Southeast Asia (15 October - 3 November) of General Maxwell D. Taylor, heading a mission asked by President Kennedy to appraise the situation in South Vietnam. The President stated the scope of Taylor's mission in the broadest terms:

While the military part of the problem is of great importance in South Viet-Nam, its political, social, and economic elements are equally significant, and I shall expect your appraisal and your recommendations to take full account of them. 14/

In his report to the President, General Taylor sketched out the nature and aims of the Viet Cong threat and assessed the strengths and weaknesses of the Diem government. He proposed a U.S. strategy for "turning the tide and for assuming the offensive in Vietnam." 15/ The report warrants summarizing in some detail, not because it outlined the main thrust of the pacification effort (it did not), but because it represents the best document to portray the range of U.S. concerns at the time the U.S. was making a major commitment to South Vietnam and because it lays out the major elements of the U.S. strategy of response.

The Viet Cong, Taylor judged, were militarily powerful and becoming more powerful. But they were not yet ready to move to the third, climactic phase of Mao's classic format for guerrilla warfare:

The military strategy being pursued is, evidently, to pin down the ARVN on defensive missions; to create a pervasive sense of insecurity and frustration by hit-and-run raids on self-defense corps and militia units, ambushing

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the reserve forces if possible as they come up to defend; and to dramatize the inability of the GVN to govern or to build, by the assassination of officials and the sabotage of public works. 16/

The purpose of this military strategy, Taylor asserted, was apparently not to capture the nation by force. Rather, in concert with non-military means, it was to produce a political crisis which would topple the government and bring to power a group willing to contemplate the unification of Vietnam on Hanoi's terms. 17/

It was in the U.S. interest, Taylor reasoned, to act vigorously -- with advice as well as aid -- in order to buy the necessary time for Vietnam to mobilize and to organize its real assets so that the Vietnamese themselves might "turn the tide" and assume the offensive. 18/ But U.S. aid and U.S. advice on where to use it were not enough. The Diem Government itself had to be reformed in order to permit it to mobilize the nation. Diem had, in Taylor's assessment, allowed two vicious circles to develop which vitiated government effectiveness. In the first of these circles poor military intelligence led to a defensive stance designed primarily to guard against attacks, which in turn meant that most of the military forces came under the control of the province chiefs whose responsibility it was to protect the populace and installations. This control by province chiefs meant that reserves could not, because of tangled lines of command and control, be moved and controlled quickly enough to be effective. The effect of high losses in unsuccessful defensive battles served further to dry up the basic sources of intelligence. 19/

The second vicious circle stemmed from Diem's instinctive attempts to centralize power in his own hands while fragmenting it beneath him. His excessive mistrust of many intellectuals and younger Vietnamese, individuals badly needed to give his administration vitality, served only to alienate them and led them to stand aside from constructive participation -- thereby further increasing Diem's mistrust. 20/ This administrative style fed back, too, into the military equation and through it, created another potentially explosive political-military problem:

The inability to mobilize intelligence effectively for operational purposes directly flows from this fact [Diem's administrative practice] as do the generally poor relations between the Province Chiefs and the military commanders, the former being Diem's reliable agents, the latter a power base he fears. The consequent frustration of Diem's military commanders -- a frustration well-known to Diem and heightened by the November 1960 coup -- leads him to actions which further complicate his problem; e.g., his unwillingness to delegate military operations clearly to his generals. 21/

General Taylor's recommended actions for the U.S. were designed to demonstrate U.S. commitment in order to strengthen Diem's stand and,

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simultaneously, to broaden U.S. participation in the hope of bringing about necessary reforms in Diem's regime. The President's emissary rejected the alternatives of a military takeover which would make the generals dominant in all fields. He rejected, too, the alternative of replacing Diem with a weaker figure who would be willing to delegate authority to both military and civil leaders. 22/ The first course would emphasize the solution to only one set of problems while slighting others; the second would permit action, but not coordinated action.

B. "Limited Partnership"

In order to move in a coordinated way on the intermingled military, political, economic, and social problems facing South Vietnam, General Taylor recommended that the U.S. initiate a "limited partnership" which would stop short of direct U.S. action but would also, through persuasion at many levels judiciously mixed with U.S. leverage, "...force the Vietnamese to get their house in order in one area after another." 23/ Increased material assistance from the U.S. would be accompanied with increased U.S. participation at all levels of government in which the American advisors must "...as friends and partners -- not as arms-length advisors -- show them how the job might be done -- not tell them or do it for them." If strongly motivated, tactful Americans were assigned primarily outside Saigon, thus avoiding the establishment of large headquarters not actually engaged in operational tasks, Taylor thought that this increased U.S. participation would not be "counter-productive"; e.g., lend substance to claims of U.S. imperialism and dominance of the Diem Government. 24/

Thus, Taylor consciously opted for a U.S. course of action in which the major thrust of effort would be to induce Diem to do the things that the U.S. thought should be done: to draw the disaffected into the national effort and to organize and equip so that effective action would be possible. General Taylor did not argue explicitly that success would follow automatically if Diem's practices could be reformed and his operational capabilities upgraded, but he implied this outcome. The question of an overall strategy to defeat the insurgency came very close to being regarded as a problem in the organization and management of resources. Since GVN had no national plan, efforts were concentrated on inducing them to produce one. There was much less concern about the substance of the non-existent GVN plan. It was almost as though there had to be something to endorse or to criticize before substantive issues could be treated as relevant.

C. U.S.-Proposed National Plans

This priority of business is reflected in the U.S. plans which were proposed to GVN for adoption by the latter. In late 1960 the U.S. Country Team in Saigon produced an agreed "Counterinsurgency Plan for Viet-Nam" (CIP). The plan was an attempt to specify roles and relationships within GVN in the counterinsurgency effort, to persuade Diem to abandon his bilineal chain of command in favor of a single command line with integrated effort at all levels within the government, and to create the governmental machinery for coordinated national planning. 25/ It

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was recognized that these recommendations were not palatable to President Diem, but reorganization along the lines specified was regarded as essential to successful accomplishment of the counterinsurgent effort. 26/

The CIP was an indictment of GVN failure to organize effectively and to produce coordinated national plans. 27/ It advanced no operational concepts for adoption by GVN. This obvious omission was corrected in the "Geographically Phased National Level Operation Plan for Counterinsurgency" which MAAG Vietnam published on 15 September 1961. 28/ Not only did this plan specify the areas of primary interest for pacification operations -- as its title indicates -- it also set forth a conceptual outline of the three sequential phases of actions which must be undertaken. In the first, "preparatory phase," the intelligence effort was to be concentrated in the priority target areas, surveys were to be made to pinpoint needed economic and political reforms, plans were to be drawn up, and military and political cadres were to be trained for the specific objective area. 29/ The second, or "military phase," would be devoted to clearing the objective area with regular forces, then handing local security responsibility over to the Civil Guard (CG) and to establishing GVN presence. 30/ In the final, "security phase," the Self Defense Corps (SDC) would assume the civil action-local security mission, the populace was to be "reoriented," political control was to pass to civilian hands, and economic and social programs were to be initiated to consolidate government control. Military units would be withdrawn as security was achieved and the target area would be "secured" by the loyalty of its inhabitants -- a loyalty attributable to GVN's successful responses to the felt needs of the inhabitants. 31/

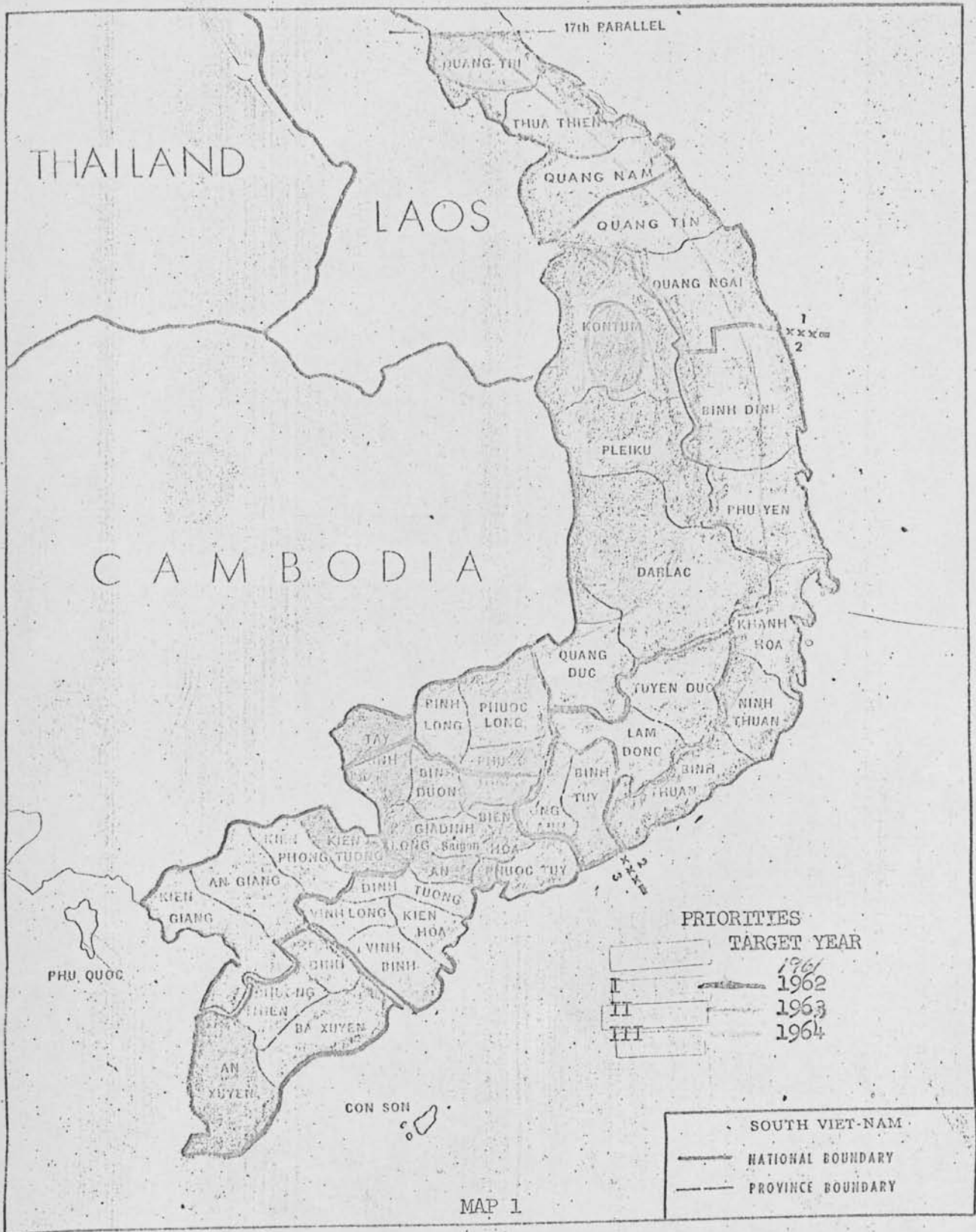
First priority in this plan (1962 operations) was to go to six provinces around Saigon and to the Kontum area. Second priority (1963) would be given to expansion southward into the Delta and southward in the Central Highlands from Kontum. Third priority (1964) would continue the spread of GVN control in the highlands and shift the emphasis in the south to the provinces north and east of Saigon. Before any of these priority actions were undertaken, however, it was proposed to conduct an ARVN sweep in War Zone D, in the jungles northeast of Saigon, to reduce the danger to the capital and to increase ARVN's self-confidence. 32/ (See Map 1.)

The geographically phased plan complemented the earlier CIP. Together, these two U.S. efforts constituted an outline blueprint for action. It is, of course, arguable that this was the best conceivable blueprint, but it was at least a comprehensive basis for refinement -- for arguments for different priorities or a changed "series of events" in the process of pacification.

D. Initial Vietnamese Reactions

This is not how matters proceeded, in the event. Ambassador Durbrow, General McGarr, and others urged acceptance of the CIP upon President Diem, but with only partial success. 33/ Diem stoutly resisted the adoption of a single, integrated chain of operational command, showed no enthusiasm for detailed prior planning, continued his practice of centralized decision-making (sometimes tantamount to decision piegonholing),

U.S. MAAG Geographically Phased Plan



MAP 1



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and continued to play off the province chiefs against the generals. Some aspects of the CIP were accepted, but the basic organizational issues remained unresolved and the strategic approach unresolved by default.

The unsuccessful U.S. attempts to secure organizational reforms within the Diem government had assumed psychological primacy by the time of General Taylor's October 1961 mission to Saigon. The American position was essentially that no operational plan could succeed unless GVN were reorganized to permit effective implementation. It was reorganization that Taylor emphasized, as detailed above. But General Taylor did bring up the need for some coordinated operational plan in his talks with President Diem. Diem's response is described in a cable to Washington by Ambassador Nolting:

Taylor several times stressed importance of overall plan -- military, political, economic, psychological, etc. -- for dealing with guerrillas. Diem tended avoid clear response this suggestion but finally indicated that he has a new strategic plan of his own. Since it was not very clear in spite efforts to draw him out what this plan is, Taylor asked him to let us have a copy in writing. 34/

E. Thompson's Counterproposals

President Diem may have been whistling in the dark about a new plan of his own. It is likely, however, that he was already conversant with the ideas of a new high level advisor who had been in Saigon for several weeks and whose approach to prosecuting the war he would soon endorse officially as his own. The advisor was RGK Thompson, a British civil servant who had come from the position of Permanent Secretary of Defense in Malaya. Thompson's British Advisory Mission was in Saigon in response to Diem's request for experienced third country nationals to assist him in his counterinsurgent operations. There had been some initial U.S. objection to British "advice without responsibility," but fears had been temporarily allayed when it was agreed that Thompson's charter would be limited to civic action matters.

Thompson provided Diem his initial "appreciation" (or, in U.S. terminology, "estimate of the situation") in October 1961. 35/ His assessment was well received by the President, who asked him to follow it up with a specific plan. Thompson's response, an outline plan for the pacification of the Delta area, was given to the President on 13 November. Thus, Thompson was in the process of articulating one potentially comprehensive strategic approach at the same time that the U.S. was deeply involved in fashioning a major new phase in U.S.-GVN relations in which major new U.S. aid would be tied to Diem's acceptance of specified reforms and, inferentially, to his willingness to pursue some agreed, coordinated strategy. Thompson's plan was, in short, a potential rival to the American-advanced plans represented by the CIP and the geographically phased MAAG plan of September 1961.

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In order to assess the similarities and differences between the U.S. plans and that advanced by the British Advisory Mission, it is necessary to summarize Thompson's argument and proposals. Like Taylor (with whom he talked and to whom he gave a copy of his initial "appreciation" at the latter's request), Thompson saw the VC objective to be one of political denouement by combined military and political action rather than a military takeover of the entire nation. Like McGarr and the other U.S. military advisors, he recognized the probability and danger of VC attempts to control the unpopulated areas and to use them both as a base form which to project an image of political strength and as secure areas from which (in the case of War Zone D, northeast of Saigon) to threaten the capital. But unlike the U.S. military advisors, Thompson viewed the primary threat to be to the political stability of the populated rural areas. 36/ Consequently, he regarded McGarr's proposed initial operation in War Zone D to be a step in the wrong direction.

The main government target, Thompson argued, should not be simply the destruction of VC forces. Rather, it should be to offer an attractive and constructive alternative to communist appeals. This could only be done by emphasizing national reconstruction and development in the populated rural areas. To do so would require extensive and stringent security measures, to be sure, but these measures required primarily police rather than regular military forces. The police could establish a close rapport with the populace; the army could not. The army should have the mission to keep the VC off balance by mobile action in order to prevent insurgent attacks on the limited areas in which GVN would concentrate its initial pacification efforts. 37/

This line of argument was more fully developed in Thompson's draft plan for the pacification of the Delta area, given to President Diem on 11 November. 38/ The objective of the plan was to win loyalties rather than to kill insurgents. For that reason Thompson selected a populous area with relatively little VC main force activity. The thrust of his proposal was that "clear and hold" operations should replace "search and destroy" sweeps. ARVN might be used to protect the villages while the villages were organizing to protect themselves and mobile ARVN forces must be available to reinforce local defense units, but the process should be abandoned of "sweeping" through an area -- and then leaving it. The peasants must be given the assurance of physical security so that economic and social improvements, the real object of the plan, could proceed without interruption.

The means by which the villagers would be protected was the "strategic hamlet," a lightly guarded village because it was -- by definition -- in a relatively low risk area. More heavily defended centers, called "defended hamlets" and involving more relocation, would be employed in areas under more VC influence, particularly along the Cambodian border.

To control this effort in the Delta, Thompson recommended that the ARVN III Corps Headquarters be reinforced with paramilitary and civil components, relieved of its responsibility for the area around and north of Saigon, and function under the immediate supervision of the National Security Council -- presided over by President Diem. The province chiefs,

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already under Diem's personal direction, would be responsible on all emergency matters to the reinforced III Corps Headquarters (to be called the Combined Headquarters), but continue as before with respect to routine administration. 39/

Thompson presented this Delta plan as a program of wide potential:

...It should lead by stages to a reorganization of the government machinery for directing and coordinating all action against the communists and to the production of an overall strategic operational plan for the country as a whole defining responsibilities, tasks and priorities. At the same time it will lead to the establishment of a static security framework which can be developed eventually into a National Police force into which can be incorporated a single security intelligence organization for the direction and coordination of all intelligence activities against the communists. I agree with Your Excellency that it would be too disruptive at the present moment to try to achieve these immediately and that they should be developed gradually. Using a medical analogy, the remedy should be clinical rather than surgical. 40/

III. DEVELOPING A CONSENSUS AMONG THE ADVISORS

A. Initial Reaction of U.S. Military Advisors

It is not difficult to imagine the shocked reaction to Thompson's proposals, especially in U.S. military circles. In fact, one need not imagine them; General McGarr has recorded a detailed rejoinder to Thompson's proposals. He was, to begin with, upset about the lack of prior coordination:

Following Mr. Thompson's medical analogy...we have the case of a doctor called in for consultation on a clinical case, actually performing an amputation without consulting the resident physician -- and without being required to assume the overall responsibility for the patient. 41/

General McGarr's unhappiness with Thompson was not simply a case of injured feelings. He had four related categories of disagreements with the plan proposed by the British Advisory Mission. First, Thompson's recommended command arrangements, if adopted, would demolish the prospect of a unitary chain of command within ARVN, an objective toward which McGarr had been working for over a year. Additionally, the Thompson proposals would leave Diem as the ultimate manager of an operation dealing with only a portion (the Delta) of RVN. The elimination of practices such as this had been an explicit objective of the entire U.S. advisory effort for a long time.

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Second, the proposed priority in the Delta clashed with McGarr's priorities which placed War Zone D first, the area around Saigon second, and the Delta third. There was a lack of unanimity among the U.S. advisors about the relative importance of the War Zone D operation but the military, in particular, were looking for an important operation to help the (hopefully) revitalized ARVN demonstrate its offensive spirit and mobile capabilities. This desire gave rise to the third and fourth objections -- or fears.

The "static security framework" in the villages to which Thompson referred struck General McGarr as an unwarranted downgrading of the need for a sizeable conventional military force to play an important role in pacification. Thompson's stated desire to emphasize police forces in lieu of regular military forces was regarded by the U.S. military advisory chief as unrealistic -- a transferral of Malayan experience to a locale in which the existing tools of policy were very different.

Related to this objection was a final set of disagreements. Thompson had wanted to go slowly and to let a new GVN organization grow from the effort. The U.S. military advisory chief also wanted to go slowly -- but not that slowly. Not only would the Viet Cong not wait, it was simply unsound policy not to use the tools at hand. It would not do to reduce the ARVN and increase police forces while the VC continued their successes. It was necessary, in sum, to act in a limited area but to act quickly. Thompson's recommendations did not look to quick action, emphasized the wrong area, were designed to emphasize the wrong operational agency, and proposed unacceptable command lines. 42/

It is important to note that in spite of these explicit disagreements there were broad areas of apparent agreement between Thompson and his U.S. counterparts. (Apparent, because the "areas of agreement" concealed differences, too.) The U.S. MAAG was amenable to the development of strategic hamlets, General McGarr claimed. 43/ Indeed, MAAG's long, diffuse doctrinal "handbook" for advisors in the field did devote three pages -- without any particular emphasis -- to the "secure village concept." 44/ MAAG did not stress the centrality of strategic hamlets per se, but neither did Thompson. Strategic hamlets were to Thompson a way station enroute to his real objective -- winning the loyalty of the rural peasants. This was apparently compatible with the sequential steps to pacification outlined in MAAG's own Geographically Phased Counterinsurgency Plan. If the competing approaches of the U.S. and British advisors had not been made compatible, there was, at least, some agreed ground from which to launch the effort to make them compatible.

#### B. Reactions in Washington

That such ground existed was fortunate, for Thompson's evolutionary plan was not only finding a warm reception at the Presidential Palace, it was also winning an attentive ear in Washington. As already mentioned, Thompson talked with General Taylor during the latter's October 1961 mission to Saigon and provided Taylor a copy of the initial British "appreciation."



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Copies of the Thompson memorandum on the Delta were also forwarded to Taylor at the latter's request. 45/ Then in January 1962, Thompson, again responding to Taylor's request, sent the latter a long letter outlining his views. In less than a month, General Taylor could present to President Kennedy a plan entitled "A Strategic Concept for South Vietnam" by Roger Hilsman which was an unabashed restatement of most of Thompson's major points and toward which President Kennedy had, not incidentally, already expressed a favorable disposition. 46/

Hilsman's "strategic concept" avowedly flowed from three basic principles: that the problem in Vietnam presented by the VC was political rather than military in its essence; that an effective counterinsurgency plan must provide the people and villages with protection and physical security; and that counter guerrilla forces must adopt the same tactics as those used by the guerrilla himself. 47/

To translate these principles into operational reality, Hilsman called for "strategic villages" and "defended villages" à la Thompson, with first priority to the most populous areas; i.e., the Delta and in the vicinity of Hue. 48/ ARVN would, much as in Thompson's proposal, secure the initial effort, when necessary, and be employed to keep the VC off balance in those areas already under Viet Cong control. The plan envisaged a three-phase process by which GVN control would progressively be expanded from the least heavily VC-penetrated provinces with large populations (phase I), into the more heavily penetrated population centers (phase II), and finally into the areas along the Laotian and Cambodian borders (phase III). 49/ Hilsman eschewed use of the "oil spot" analogy but the process and rationale he put forth were the same. His plan moved "strategic villages" to a place of prominence greater than that in Thompson's Delta plan and far in excess of the offhanded acceptance which had thus far been afforded them by U.S. military advisors. Strategic hamlets were not the heart of the Hilsman plan -- civic action was that -- but they were the symbol, the easily recognizable, easily grasped initial step by which GVN could begin, following Hilsman's second principle, to "provide the people and the villages with protection and physical security." 50/

C. The Advisors Reach Agreement

Thompson's basic ideas were gaining wide dissemination at the highest level within the U.S. government in early 1962. What of his relations with the U.S. MAAG in Saigon? These had been significantly improved as the result of a meeting between Thompson, Ambassador Nolting, and British Ambassador Hohler. Thompson agreed to revise his paper so as to remove the objection to his proposed command arrangements. Ambassador Nolting reported that Thompson was now working "closely and amicably" with MAAG. 51/ This took care of one of McGarr's objections. Thompson had apparently decided, too, to allow the issue to drop for the time being of police primacy in pacification vis-à-vis ARVN. It was not, after all, a change that could be made quickly; President Diem was convinced that some start was needed to save his administration. That had been his reason, after all, in reluctantly inviting increased American participation in the war.

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Secretary McNamara played an important role in disposing of still another issue in dispute -- that of where to begin. In mid-December 1961, after President Kennedy had decided to adopt essentially all of General Taylor's November recommendations except the introduction of major U.S. forces into Vietnam, Secretary McNamara met in Honolulu with the U.S. principals in Vietnam to discuss future plans. A central question was that of what could be done in the short term future. The Secretary of Defense made it clear that RVN had "number one priority." 52/ McNamara urged concentration on one province: "I'll guarantee it [the money and equipment] provided you have a plan based on one province. Take one place, sweep it and hold it in a plan." 53/ Or, put another way, let us demonstrate that in some place, in some way, we can achieve demonstrable gains.

General McGarr, immediately upon his return to Saigon, wrote to Secretary Thuan and passed on this proposal:

I would like to suggest that you may wish to set aside one specific area, say a province, and use it as a "test area," in establishing this type "pacification infrastructure." My thinking is that all the various elements of this anti-VC groundwork be designated immediately by your government and trained as a team or teams for the actual reoccupation and holding of the designated communist infiltrated area when it has been cleared by RVNAF military action. 54/

Such teams would embrace, McGarr suggested, police, intelligence, financial, psychological, agricultural, medical, civic action, and civil political functions. 55/

IV. THE ADVISORS "SELL" DIEM (OR VICE-VERSA)

A. Where to Begin?

GVN did indeed have a province in mind. It was not a Delta province, however. Nor was it a province relatively secure from VC infiltration. Quite to the contrary, Binh Duong Province, extending north and northwest of Saigon, had been heavily infiltrated. Its main communications axis (National Highway 13, extending northward from Saigon into Cambodia) sliced directly between War Zone D and War Zone C. The province was crossed by important routes of communications, liaison, and supply between two insurgent redoubts. Hardly the logical place to begin, one might say, but "logic" was being driven by events and desires more than by abstract reasoning.

One desire was the widely held wish to do something concrete and productive as a symbol of U.S. determination and GVN vitality. Another desire was GVN's wish to commit the Americans to support of Diem's government on terms which would be in fact acceptable to that government and would -- equally important -- appear to be U.S. support for GVN-initiated actions. If one were Vietnamese one might reason that Binh Duong was an

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area of unquestionable strategic importance -- and one in which GVN had already initiated some pacification efforts. If the Americans wish to concentrate in one province and if they are willing to underwrite the effort with resources, why not begin in an important strategic area where work is already underway?

GVN had initiated, in August 1961, a "Rural Reconstruction Campaign" in the Eastern Region of South Vietnam to secure the provinces of Tay Ninh, Binh Duong, and Phuoc Tuy. 56/ Most of the effort prior to December 1961 had been concentrated in the Cu Chi District of Binh Duong. Xom Hue Hamlet of Tan An Hoi was, during December, in the process of being fortified as a strategic hamlet. 57/ General McGarr was under the impression that "considerable progress" had already been made in these three provinces in the establishment of the GVN village level activities so necessary to winning popular support. 58/

In mid-January General McGarr met (just prior to his departure for Honolulu) with President Diem and Secretary Thuan to discuss pacification plans. As McGarr told Secretary McNamara, Diem stressed that the MAAG-endorsed military operation in War Zone D might merely close the string on an empty bag. Such a failure would be detrimental to ARVN morale. Besides, the President observed echoing Thompson, "sweeps" solved nothing; the problem was to hold an area and to separate the VC from the rest of the populace. Diem preferred a concentrated effort in Binh Duong, a heavily infiltrated province, close to Saigon, of great strategic importance, and in which only 10 of 46 villages were under GVN control -- but in which the groundwork for a sound government infrastructure had already been laid. 59/

The discussions at the Secretary of Defense's Conference in Honolulu turned on whether or not the War Zone D operation offered more hope for a concrete gain than a "single province" pacification scheme. McNamara concluded that it did not. General McGarr dissented mildly from the selection of Binh Duong. He would have favored Phuoc Tuy (where U.S. troops were scheduled to land if a decision were ever made to commit them). But Binh Duong was GVN's plan and the "limited partners" finally agreed to back Diem's preferred attempt. 60/ Thus, the U.S. came to a roundabout decision to support as a "test" of what would later be called the "strategic hamlet program" an operation about whose details they knew little, in an area that all recognized to be difficult, because it allegedly represented a long-sought example of GVN initiative in planning and civil-military preparation. Much of the public image of the strategic hamlet program was to be established by this operation, as it turned out. Its name was "Operation Sunrise." But it was not -- U.S. desires to the contrary -- the only strategic hamlet effort to be carried forward during this period. It was only one of several -- and several grew very quickly into many.

B. Concurrent GVN Activity

It has already been suggested that President Diem responded with some enthusiasm to the early proposals from Thompson's British Advisory Mission. In mid-February 1962, President Diem approved orally Thompson's



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"Delta Pacification Plan" and said he would like to see it executed without delay. 61/ Earlier, on 3 February, he had created by presidential decree the Inter-Ministerial Committee for Strategic Hamlets (IMCSH), comprising the heads of various ministries (Defense, Interior, Education, Civic Action, Rural Affairs, etc.). 62/ The IMCSH was, as its membership indicates, a coordinating body designed to give national direction and guidance to the program. Its importance is not in its work -- for it apparently did very little -- but as an indicator of Diem's early 1962 thinking of strategic hamlets as a national program and of the central role which his brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, would play in this program.

Nhu was the real driving force behind GVN's uneven but discernible movement toward adoption of the strategic hamlet theme as a unifying concept in its pacification efforts. In the early period under discussion he masked his central role, however. He was not announced as the Chairman of the IMCSH (nobody was), but the committee was responsible to him. 63/ He did not, however, lead it actively. As two American observers remarked at the time, "Nhu seems to have consulted the committee seldom and to have shared his policy-making power with it even less frequently." 64/

C. Early Signs of GVN Expectations

But although brother Nhu was behind the scenes in late 1961 and early 1962, an occasional fleeting glimpse of his thinking and the direction in which he was heading has still managed to show through. A CIA report from Saigon summarized Nhu's instructions to a dozen province chiefs from the Delta in a meeting held on 14 December 1961. Primary emphasis was to be placed on the strategic hamlet program, Nhu said, and this program was to be coupled with a "social revolution" against "Viet-Nam's three enemies: divisive forces, low standard of living, and communism." 65/ The CIA Task Force - Vietnam observed, in forwarding this report, that Nhu's "social revolution and strategic hamlets appear to be fuzzy concepts with little value in the fight against the Communists." 66/

No doubt these concepts seemed fuzzy at the end of 1961. But within another twelve months, as events would prove, they would be widely recognized as the twin spearheads of GVN's counterinsurgent effort, fuzzy or not. The strategic hamlet program would have broad support within the U.S. government and financial resources to underpin that support. The "social revolution" to which Nhu referred in December 1961 would be surfaced as Diem's "personalism" drive. The important thing for the present analysis is that all of the expectations of the several participant groups -- both U.S. and GVN -- were identifiable by very early 1962 at the latest, and that the concept of the strategic hamlet program in the broad sense had been fully adumbrated. The skeleton -- the rationale -- was complete; the body -- operational programs -- had not yet taken form. Each group could, however, work toward construction of a slightly different body (and for differing reasons) and claim with some plausibility to be working from the same skeleton.



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V. DIFFERING PERSPECTIVES AND EXPECTATIONS

Three somewhat different views may be categorized which are of interest to the present inquiry: those of the U.S. military advisors, of the U.S. political leadership, and of the Diem government's leaders. Such generalizations are admittedly risky and easily overdrawn; there were, of course, differences between the perceptions and expectations of, say, the U.S. military advisors. For example, those farthest from Saigon tended to be less patient -- with Diem and in expecting results -- than were those closer to the area of operations. Still, discernible differences of outlook and expectations may be said to represent the prevailing views in each of these three groups.

A. U.S. Military Advisors

The U.S. military advisors mistrusted arguments which stressed the Vietnamese struggle as essentially political rather than military. They were quite willing to concede that the struggle was multi-dimensional but they feared instinctively any line of reasoning which might appear to argue that military considerations were relatively unimportant in Vietnam. So, too, they were wary of schemes which might lead ARVN to perpetuate its defensive tactical stance. Both dangers were present in the strategic hamlet program. The same military advisors were more forceful than others in stressing the need for the Diem regime to rationalize its command arrangements and to plan comprehensively and in detail from the highest to lowest levels. Their operational interest concentrated on making ARVN not just more mobile but more aggressive. Their creed, developed through years of experience and training (or vicarious experience) was to "close with and destroy the enemy." One could expect them, then, to be more than willing to turn over the job of static defense to the CDC and CG at the earliest opportunity, to keep a weather eye out for opportunities to engage major VC formations in decisive battle, and to chafe under the painfully slow evolutionary process which was implicit even in their own 1961 geographically phased plan.

B. U.S. Political Leadership

The U.S. political leadership, and to varying degrees the leaders in the Saigon Embassy and in USOM, were more attuned to the political problems -- both with respect to GVN-U.S. relations and to the problem of winning broad support among the Vietnamese for the Diem administration. This made members of this group inherently more sympathetic to proposals such as the Thompson plan for the Delta than they were, for instance, to increasing ARVN's size and capabilities. They found compelling the logic of analyses such as Hilsman's which cut to the political root rather than treating only the military symptoms. One suspects -- though documentation would never be found to support it -- that they were attracted by an argument which did suggest some hope for "demilitarizing" the war, de-emphasizing U.S. operational participation, and increasing GVN's ability to solve its own internal problems using primarily its own human resources.

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C. President Diem

Ngo Dinh Diem's perspective and expectations were the most different of all. U.S. groups differed in degree; Diem's expectations were different in kind. He wanted, first of all, to obtain unequivocal U.S. support, not just to his nation but to his administration. It was essential, in his eyes, that this support not compromise his authority or Vietnamese sovereignty. He did not want to give credence to communist claims that he was a puppet of the U.S., on one hand, or concentrate the coercive instruments of power in the hand of potential antagonists, on the other.

A revealing assessment of Diem's frame of mind is provided by Ambassador Nolting. Diem invited increased U.S. aid and U.S. participation because he feared that, especially with an impending settlement in Laos, South Vietnam would come under increasing communist pressures. If Diem's government could not win over these pressures -- and Diem feared it could not -- it had only the choice of going down fighting or of being overthrown by a coup. Thus, in requesting additional U.S. help, Diem had "adopted an expedient which runs against his own convictions, and he is apparently willing to accept the attendant diminution of his own stature as an independent and self-reliant national leader." 67/

But when Ambassador Nolting presented to Diem the U.S. quid pro quo for its "limited partnership," this apparent acceptance of decreased stature and independence suddenly seemed less apparent. 68/ Then, as Nolting reported, President Diem feared the reaction even among his own cabinet aides. 69/ Secretary Thuan, in whom Diem did confide, said that the President was brooding over the fact that the U.S. was asking great concessions of GVN in the realm of its sovereignty in exchange for little additional help. 70/ Diem argued that U.S. influence over his government, once it was known, would play directly into the communists' hands. The first priority task, he added, was to give the people security, not to make the government more popular. To try it the other way around was to place the cart before the horse. 71/

Diem saw himself caught in a dilemma in which he was doomed if he did not get outside assistance and doomed if he got it only at the price of surrendering his independence. To him the trick was to get the U.S. committed without surrendering his independence. One possible solution lay in getting U.S. material aid for a program that would be almost wholly GVN-implemented. The strategic hamlet program offered a convenient vehicle for this purpose and one which was also appealing for other reasons. It put achieving security before winning loyalty -- in an operational context in which it was difficult to differentiate between security for the rural populace and control of that populace, since many of the actions to achieve one were almost identical to the acts to realize the other.

D. The Central Issue

The U.S., for its part, was asking Diem to forego independence by accepting the wisdom of the American recommendations for reform. The

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central question was whether he would -- or could -- do so. Among those who responded to this question in the negative, J. Kenneth Galbraith was most trenchant:

In my completely considered view . . . Diem will not reform either administratively or politically in any effective way. That is because he cannot. It is politically naive to expect it. He senses that he cannot let power go because he would be thrown out. 72/

The U.S. decided that Diem could make meaningful reforms and that he would do so -- or at least it decided that it was likely enough that he would do so and that support for his administration constituted the best available policy alternative.

E. The Problem of Assessment

The differences in perspectives and expectations outlined above are important in their own right. They loom even larger, however, when one considers the difficulty of assessing progress in the program about to be undertaken. These groups were about to embark upon a long, arduous joint voyage. Their only chart had never been to sea. This was the newly-articulated and imperfectly understood doctrine of counterinsurgency which stressed the interaction and interdependence of political, military, social, and psychological factors. It posited the necessity for certain actions to follow immediately and successfully behind others in order for the process of pacification to succeed. Above all -- and this point cannot be overstressed -- while this doctrine recognized the need for both the carrot and the stick (for coercive control and appealing programs) it made gaining broad popular acceptance the single ultimate criterion of success. Neither kill ratios nor construction rates nor the frequency of incidents was conclusive, yet these were all indicators applicable to phases within the larger process. The gains of doing well in one phase, however, could be wiped out by inactivity or mistakes in a subsequent phase. It was, in short, very difficult to know how well one was doing until one was done.

VI. THE NATIONAL PLAN EMERGES

A. Awareness of the Unifying Potential

Before examining the quality of execution of the operational programs for which some detailed record is available it will be useful to outline the process by which the strategic hamlet program became -- by late 1962 -- a comprehensive national program embodying the major effort of GVN in pacification.

"Operation Sunrise" in Binh Duong Province was launched on 22 March 1962 in what was initially called the "Ben Cat Project." 73/ The Delta project, however, languished in a "planning stage" until May, when it first became known that Diem was considering incorporating it into the Strategic Hamlet Program. 74/ By August the IMCSH proposed a priority plan for the construction of strategic hamlets on a nation-wide basis.



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Later the same month, the U.S. Inter-Agency Committee for Province Rehabilitation concurred in this plan (with minor reservations) as a basis for planning and utilization of U.S. assistance. <sup>75/</sup> By October, the Diem government had made the Strategic Hamlet Program the explicit focus and unifying concept of its pacification effort. The government-controlled Times of Viet Nam devoted an entire issue to "1962: The Year of Strategic Hamlets." <sup>76/</sup> Ngo Dinh Nhu was unveiled as the "architect and prime mover" of the program which was the Vietnamese answer to communist strategy. As Nhu proclaimed: "Strategic hamlets seek to assure the security of the people in order that the success of the political, social, and military revolution might be assured by the enthusiastic movement of solidarity and self-sufficiency." <sup>77/</sup> President Diem had earlier put the same thought to an American visitor in clearer words:

The importance of the strategic hamlets goes beyond the concept of hamlet self defense. They are a means to institute basic democracy in Vietnam. Through the Strategic Hamlet Program, the government intends to give back to the hamlet the right of self-government with its own charter and system of community law. This will realize the ideas of the constitution on a local scale which the people can understand. <sup>78/</sup>

By this time, too, influential American circles regarded the Strategic Hamlet Program as the shorthand designation for a process which represented a sensible and sound GVN effort. Roger Hilsman had said so in February to President Kennedy, and found the latter highly receptive. He continued to say so. <sup>79/</sup> As he advised Assistant Secretary of State Averell Harriman in late 1962, "The government of Vietnam has finally developed, and is now acting upon, an effective strategic concept." <sup>80/</sup> Even so lukewarm an enthusiast as the CJCS, General Lyman L. Lemnitzer could report that ". . . the Strategic Hamlet Program promises solid benefits, and may well be the vital key to success of the pacification program." <sup>81/</sup>

The public record also shows early support from high U.S. officials for the Strategic Hamlet Program and recognition of its central role in GVN's pacification campaign. Speaking in late April 1962, Under Secretary of State George W. Ball, commented favorably in the progressive development of strategic hamlets throughout RVN as a method of combating insurgency and as a means of bringing the entire nation "under control of the government." <sup>82/</sup> Secretary McNamara told members of the press, upon his return to Washington from a Pacific meeting in July 1962, that the Strategic Hamlet Program was the "backbone of President Diem's program for countering subversion directed against his state." <sup>83/</sup>

It is reasonable to conclude from the evidence that official U.S. awareness kept abreast of Diem's progressive adoption of the Strategic Hamlet Program as the "unifying concept" in his counterinsurgent effort. The same officials were constantly bombarded by a series of reports from a variety of sources describing the progress of the hamlet program and assessing its efficacy.



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B. "Operation Sunrise"

The first operational effort in which the U.S. had a hand, "Operation Sunrise," got under way in Binh Duong Province on 22 March 1962 when work commenced on Ben Tuong, the first of five hamlets to be constructed for relocated peasants in the Ben Cat District in and around the Lai Khe rubber plantation. (See Map 2.) Phase I of the operation -- the military clearing phase -- was conducted by forces of the 5th ARVN Division reinforced by ranger companies, a reconnaissance company, two reinforced CG companies, and a psychological warfare company. The Viet Cong simply melted into the jungles.

With the Viet Cong out of the way -- at least for the time being -- the relocation and construction of the new hamlet commenced. The new program got off to a bad start. The government was able to persuade only seventy families to volunteer for resettlement. The 135 other families in the half dozen settlements were herded forcibly from their homes. <sup>84/</sup> Little of the \$300,000 in local currency provided by USOM had reached the peasants; the money was being withheld until the resettled families indicated they would not bolt the new hamlet. Some of them came with most of their meager belongings. Others had little but the clothes on their backs. Their old dwellings -- and many of their possessions -- were burned behind them. <sup>85/</sup> Only 120 males of an age to bear arms were found among the more than 200 families -- indicating very clearly that a large number had gone over to the VC, whether by choice or as a result of intimidation. <sup>86/</sup>

C. Other Early Programs

Progress in Binh Duong continued at a steady pace, beset by difficulties. By midsummer 2900 persons had been regrouped into three strategic hamlets. <sup>87/</sup> Elsewhere, the pace quickened. Although the Delta Plan, as a coordinated effort, had not been implemented by the summer of 1962, Secretary McNamara found in May an aggressive effort under way without U.S. help near Ca Mao:

Here the commander of the 31st Infantry Regiment had gone into an area 95% controlled by the VC, declared martial law, and resettled 11,000 people (some under duress) in 9 strategic hamlets, while fighting the VC wherever he found them. Since inception of the program, none of his villages have been attacked, and the freedom from VC taxation (extortion) is proving most appealing to the people. It is the commander's hope (doubtless optimistic) that he will be able to turn the whole area over to the civil guard and self defense corps within 6 months. <sup>88/</sup>

These resettlement efforts in areas which had been under VC domination were not the extent of the early hamlet "program," however. Many existing hamlets and villages were "fortified" in one degree or another early in 1962 following no discernible pattern. This appears to have been the natural product of the varied response to Nhu's injunction to emphasize strategic hamlets. In April, the GVN Ministry of the Interior informed the U.S. that 1300 such hamlets were already completed. <sup>89/</sup> "Operation Sunrise" had by this time been broadened to embrace efforts in several provinces. <sup>90/</sup> Several other Strategic Hamlet Programs were begun: "Operation Hai Yen II" (Sea Swallow) in Phu Yen Province with a goal of 281 hamlets, 157 of which were reported as completed within two months:

MAP 2.

BINH DUONG PROVINCE

ORIGINAL  
"SUNRISE" HAMLETS

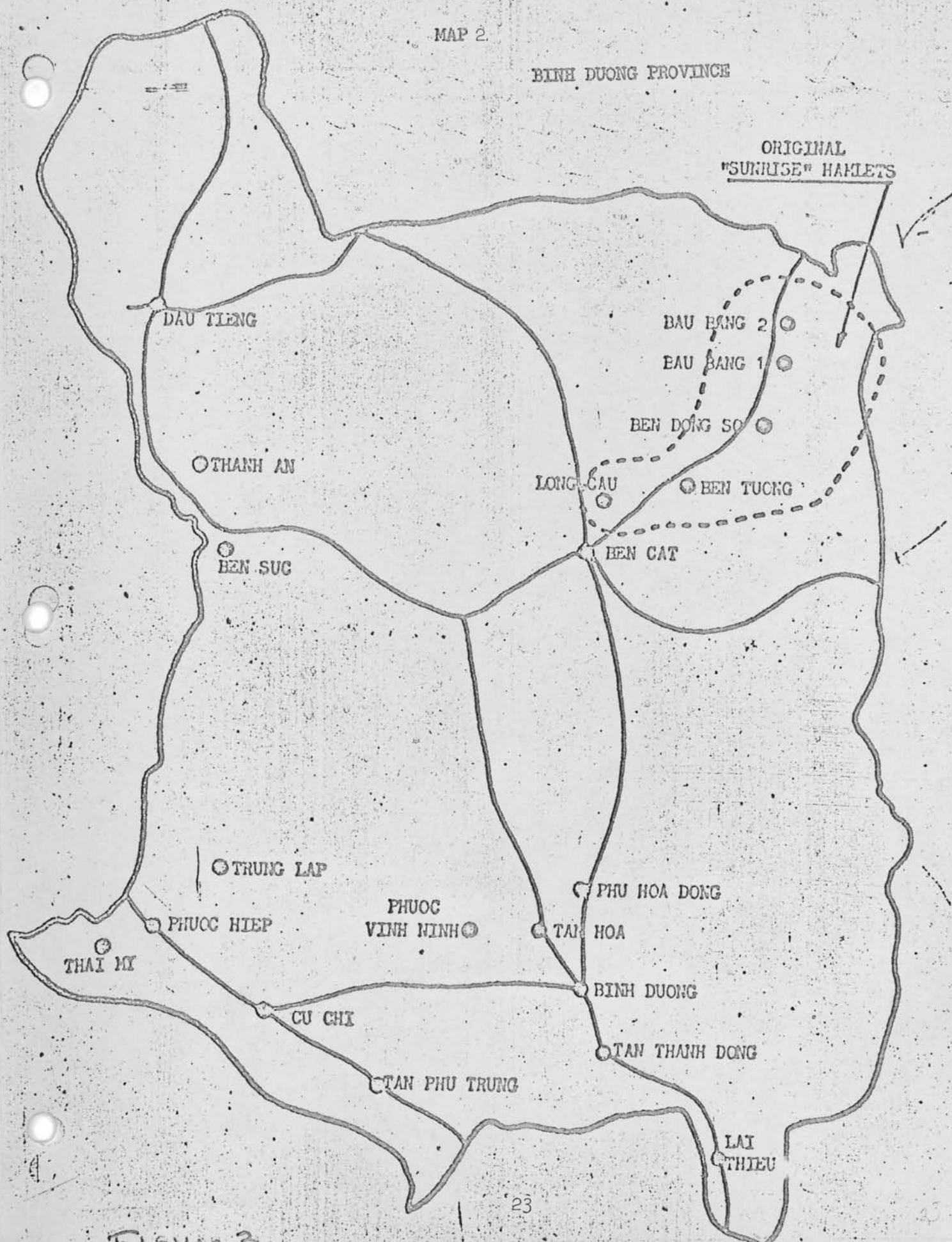


Figure 3.

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"Operation Dang Tien" (Let's go) in Binh Dinh Province with a goal of 328 strategic hamlets in its first year; and "Operation Phuong Hoang" (Royal Phoenix) in Quang Nai Province with a goal of 125 strategic hamlets by the end of 1962.

D. At Last -- A National Plan

The GVN drew all of the partialistic programs together in its August 1962 national priority plan, mentioned earlier. The nation was divided into four priority zones (Map 3). First priority was assigned to the eleven provinces around Saigon. This included essentially the area of the Thompson Delta plan plus the original area of "Operation Sunrise" plus Gia Dinh Province (Map 4). Priorities within each zone were further specified. Within the zone of first national priority, for example, the provinces of Vinh Long, Long An, and Phuoc Try were assigned the highest priority; Binh Duong -- where operations were already in progress -- was given priority three (Map 5). By the end of the summer of 1962 GVN claimed that 3,225 of the planned 11,316 hamlets had already been completed and that over 33 percent of the nation's total population was already living in completed hamlets (See Table 1).

October 1962, when Diem made the Strategic Hamlet Program the avowed focus of his counterinsurgent campaign, marks the second watershed in the development and implementation of the program. The first such watershed had been the consensus, on the potential value of such a program, which had been developed at the end of 1961 and early 1962. There would be no others until the program died with Diem.

E. Effect on U.S. Perceptions

The effect of the GVN's concentration on strategic hamlets was to make U.S. assessments focus on several sub-aspects of the problem. Attention tended to be directed toward how well hamlets were being fortified and whether or not the implementation phase was well managed; i.e., whether peasants were paid for their labor, reimbursed for their losses, and given adequate opportunity to attend their crops. Conversely, attention was directed away from the difficult-to-assess question of whether the follow-up actions to hamlet security were taking place -- the actions which would convert the peasantry from apathy (if not opposition) to identification with their central government.

This focusing on details which diverted attention from the ultimate objective took the form of reports, primarily statistical, which set forth the construction rate for strategic hamlets, the incident rate of VC activities, and the geographical areas in which GVN control was and was not in the ascendancy. These "specifics" were coupled to generalized assessments which almost invariably pointed to shortcomings in GVN's execution of the program. The shortcomings, however, were treated as problems in efficient management and operational organization; the ineluctability of increased control (or security) leading somehow to popular identification

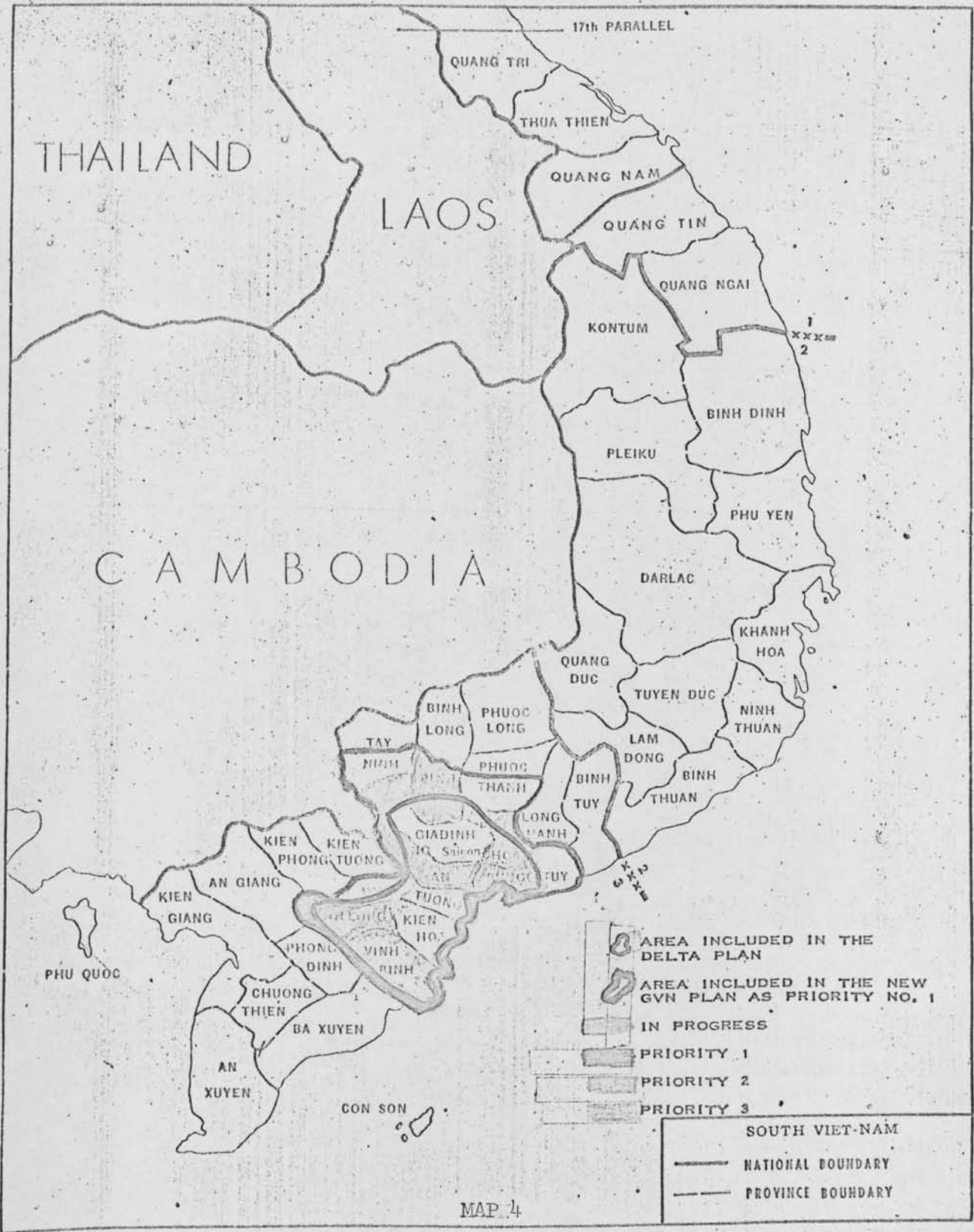
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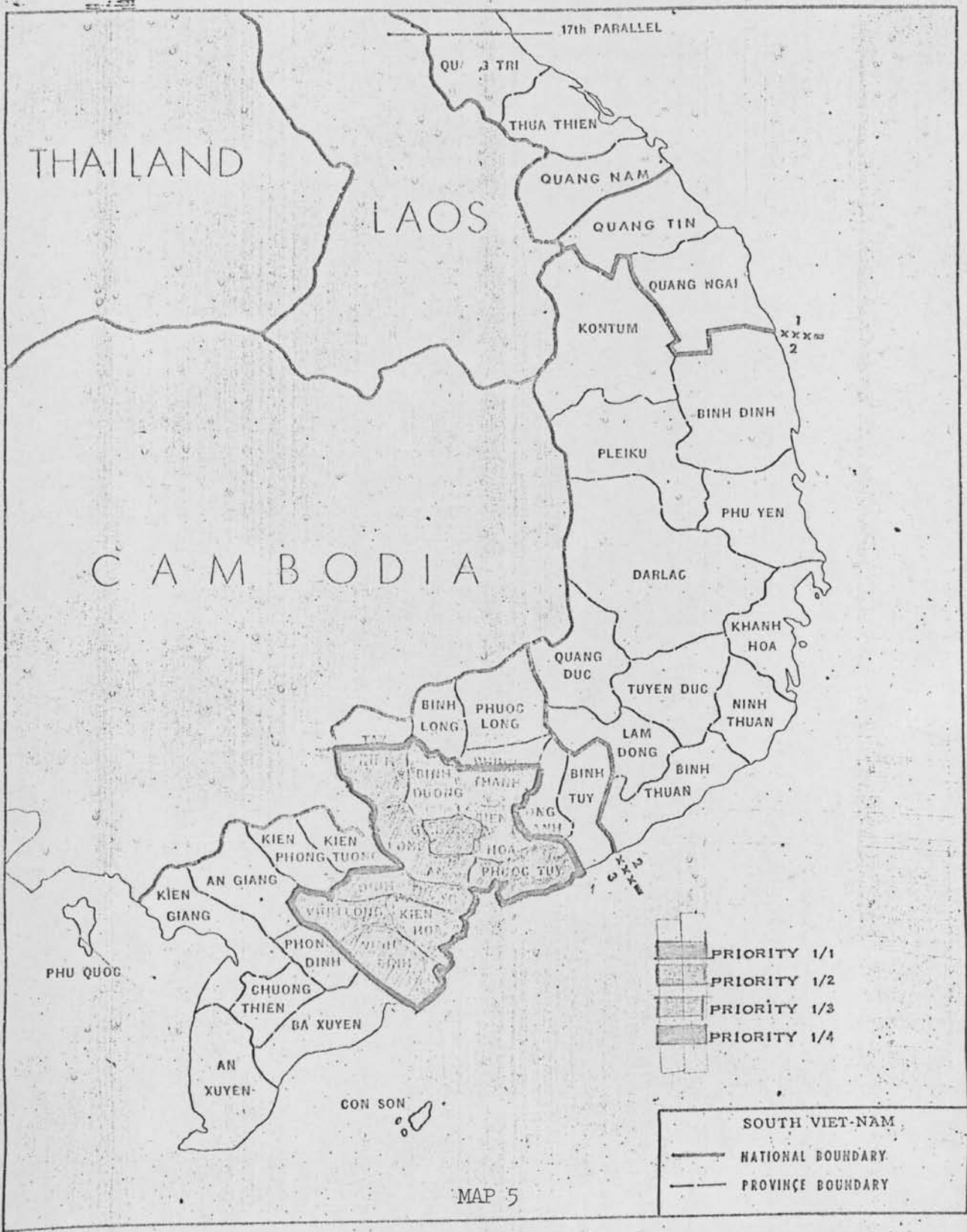


### DELTA PLAN PRIORITIES



MAP 4

### GVN PRIORITIES FOR STRATEGIC HAMLETS WITHIN THE FIRST PRIORITY ZONE



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TABLE 1

GVN REPORT ON STATUS OF STRATEGIC HAMLETS

As of 30 September 1962 \*

<u>Area</u>	<u>Strategic Hamlets Planned</u>	<u>Strategic Hamlets Completed</u>	<u>Strategic Hamlets Under Construction</u>	<u>Population in Completed Hamlets</u>
<u>SOUTHERN:</u>				
Saigon	433	105	115	261,470
Eastern Provinces	1,595	291	501	423,060
Western Provinces	4,728	1,236	702	1,874,790
SUB-TOTAL	6,756	1,632	1,318	2,559,320
<u>CENTRAL:</u>				
Central Lowlands	3,630	1,490	682	1,654,470
High Plateau	930	103	217	108,244
SUB-TOTAL	4,560	1,593	899	1,762,714
GRAND TOTAL	11,316	3,225	2,217	4,322,034

- Percentage of planned hamlets completed.....28.49%

- Percentage of total population in completed hamlets.....33.39%

\* Adapted from The Times of Vietnam, 28 October 1962, p. 17.

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by a process akin to the economic assumption of "flotation to stability through development" went unchallenged as a basic assumption. Critics pointed to needed improvements; the question of whether or not these could be accomplished, or why, almost never was raised.

"Operation Sunrise", for example, was criticized in some detail by the US MAAG. Much better planning and coordination was needed in order to relocate effectively: Aerial surveys were necessary to pinpoint the number of families to be relocated; unanticipated expenditures needed to be provided for; preparation of sites should begin before the peasants were moved; and GVN resource commitments should be carefully checked by U.S. advisors at all levels. 92/ There was no discussion of the vulnerability of the strategic hamlets to VC infiltration (as against VC attacks) or of the subsequent steps to winning support. That was not, one may assume, the military's prime concern.

Political observers who examined this follow-on aspect were cautiously optimistic:

The strategic hamlet program is the heart of our effort and deserves top priority. While it has not -- and probably will not -- bring democracy to rural Vietnam, it provides truly local administration for the first time. Coupled with measures to increase rice production and farmer income, these local administrations can work a revolution in rural Vietnam. 93/

The same tone was reflected in Michael Forrestal's report to President Kennedy in February 1963 following his visit to Vietnam with Roger Hillsman. 94/ The visitors found Ambassador Nolting and his deputy, William C. Trueheart, optimistic about the results which the program might achieve once the materials for it, then just beginning to come in, reached full volume. 95/

The Department of Defense was devoting considerable effort to insuring that these materials did reach Vietnam in, the quantities needed and in timely fashion. Secretary McNamara had been stuck with this problem during his May 1962 visit to "Operation Sunrise". He saw especially a need to program SDC, CG, and Youth Corps training so that it would match the role of hamlet building and to insure the provision of proper communications for warning purposes. 96/ A substantial amount of the MAAG-DoD effort subsequently went into programming. The Agency for International Development had agreed to fund the "Strategic Hamlet Kits" (building materials, barbed wire and stakes, light weapons, ammunition, and communication equipment), but in August 1962 it demurred, stating that supporting assistance funds in the MAP were inadequate for the purpose. 97/ Secretary McNamara agreed to undertake the financing for 1500 kits (13 million) but asked if the additional 3500 kits requested were really necessary and, if so, on what delivery schedule. The target levels and delivery dates underwent more or less continuous revision from then until the question became irrelevant in late 1963. 98/ A separate but related effort went into expediting the procurement, delivery, and installation of

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radios in the strategic hamlets so that each would have the capability to sound the alarm and request the employment of mobile reserves when attacked.

F. Differences Begin to Emerge

All of these "program management" activities were based on the unstated assumption that the strategic hamlet program would lead to effective pacification if only Diem would make it work. As it turned out, there was some disagreement between what the U.S. considered needed to be done and what President Diem knew very well he was doing. He was using the Strategic Hamlet Program to carry forward his "personalist philosophy." 99/ As brother Nhu visibly took the reins controlling the program and began to solidify control over the Youth Corps it became increasingly clear that Diem was emphasizing government control of the peasantry at the expense (at least in U.S. eyes) of pacification. 100/

As awareness in Washington increased that strategic hamlets could serve several purposes, there developed also a divergent interpretation of whether or not the GVN was "winning the war." When General Krulak, SACSA, and Joseph Mendenhall, an ex-counselor in Saigon then at State, visited RVN in September 1963, President Kennedy wryly asked upon receiving their conflicting reports, "You two did visit the same country, didn't you?" 101/ The answer is that they had, but the general stressed that the military war was going well while the diplomat asserted that the political war was being lost. The argument was not, it should be stressed, one between the generals and the diplomats; experienced diplomats disagreed fundamentally with Mendenhall. The disagreement was between those who pointed to signs of progress and those who held up examples of poor planning, corruption, and alienation of the peasants whose loyalty was the object of the exercise. Criticisms -- frequently accompanied by counterbalancing assertions that "limited progress" was being achieved -- mentioned corvee labor, GVN failures to reimburse the farmers for losses due to resettlement, the dishonesty of some officials, and Diem's stress on exhortations rather than on the provision of desirable social services. 102/

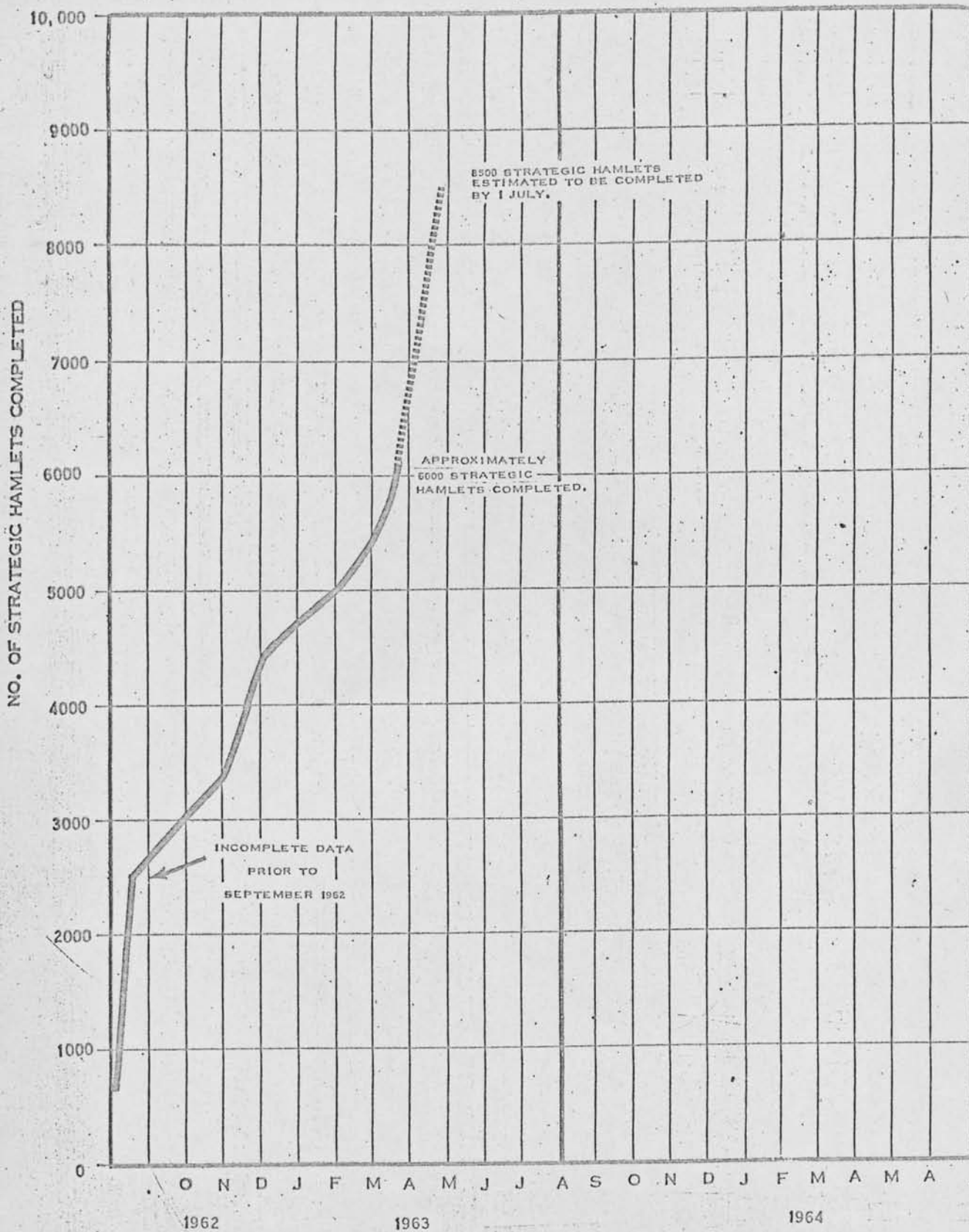
Those who emphasized that the program was showing real progress -- usually with a caveat or two that there was considerable room for improvement -- stressed statistical evidence to portray the exponential increase in strategic hamlet construction (Table 2), the declining trend in Viet Cong-initiated incidents (Table 3), the rise in VC defections (Table 4), and the slow but steady increase in GVN control of rural areas (Table 5).

The JCS observation with respect to the establishment of strategic hamlets, for instance, was that since fewer than two tenths of one percent (0.2%) of them had been overrun by the VC, "The Vietnamese people must surely be finding in them a measure of the tranquility which they seek." 103/

RCK Thompson later claimed that the very absence of attacks was an indicator that the VC had succeeded in infiltrating the hamlets. 104/ The point is not Thompson's prescience but the difficulty of reasoned assessment to which this analysis has already pointed. The U.S. course,

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### STRATEGIC HAMLET GROWTH SOUTH VIETNAM





### VIET CONG INITIATED INCIDENTS BROKEN DOWN INTO CATEGORIES (ATTACKS, TERRORISM, SABOTAGE, PROPAGANDA)

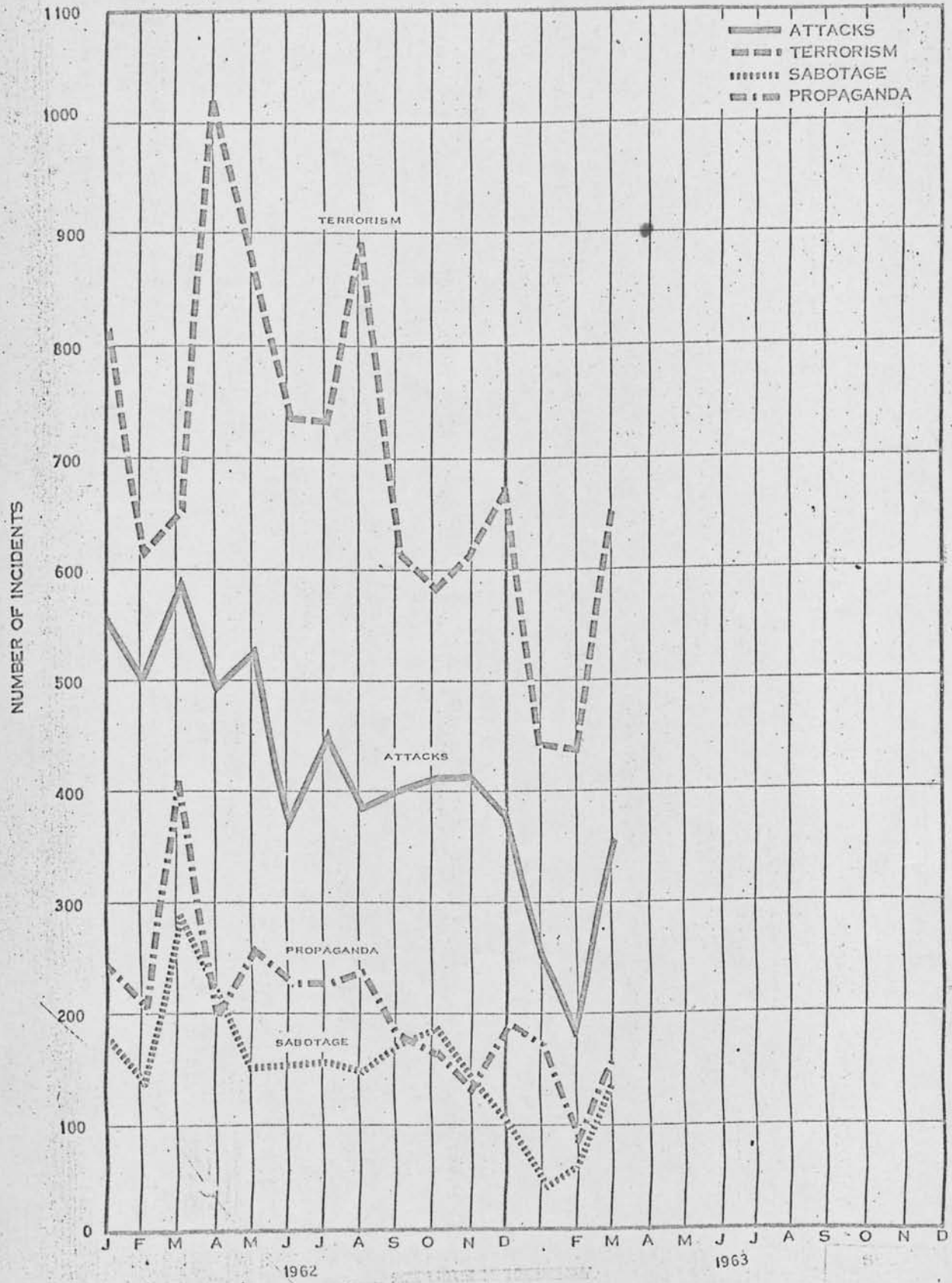
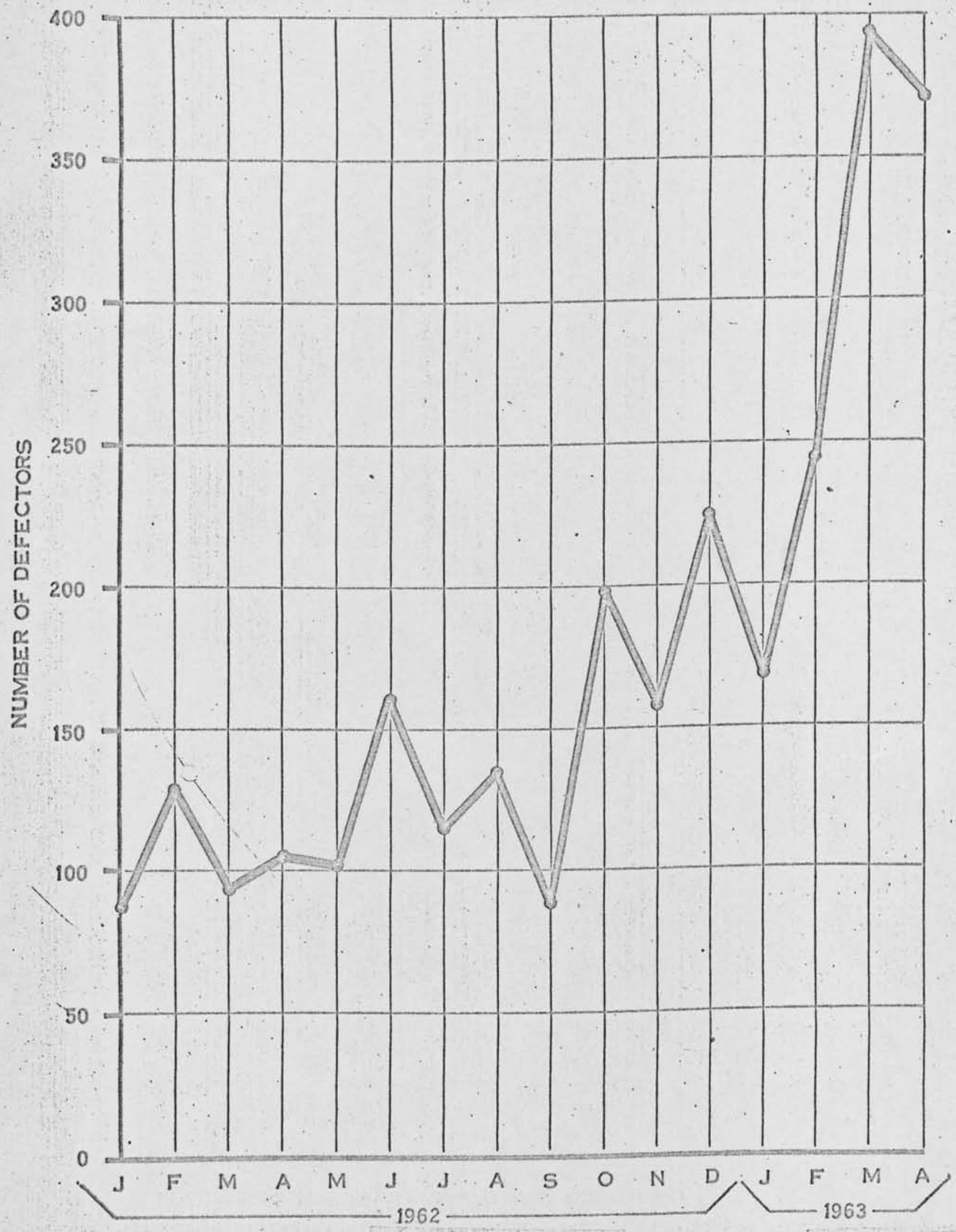


TABLE 3



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### VIET CONG DEFECTIONS



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COMPARISON OF CONTROL, GOVERNMENT OF VIETNAM AND VIET CONG  
 JULY, OCTOBER AND DECEMBER 1962,  
 AND APRIL 1963

		GOVERNMENT OF VIETNAM EFFECTIVE CONTROL	GOVERNMENT OF VIETNAM IN ASCENDANCY	NEITHER GOVERNMENT OF VIETNAM NOR VIET CONG CONTROL	VIET CONG IN ASCENDANCY	VIET CONG EFFECTIVE CONTROL
SITUATION AS OF 1 JULY 1962	NUMBER OF VILLAGES	859	710	34	422	454
	RURAL POPULATION	5,800,000	3,622,000	137,000	1,702,000	1,157,000
	% OF RURAL POPULATION	47%	29%	1%	14%	9%
SITUATION AS OF 1 OCT 1962	NUMBER OF VILLAGES	929	613	148	329	437
	RURAL POPULATION	6,071,000	3,246,000	717,000	1,275,000	1,008,000
	% OF RURAL POPULATION	49%	27%	6%	10%	8%
SITUATION AS OF 1 DEC 1962	NUMBER OF VILLAGES	951	666	120	348	445
	RURAL POPULATION	6,300,000	3,331,000	643,000	1,143,000	926,000
	% OF RURAL POPULATION	51%	27%	5%	9%	8%
SITUATION AS OF 1 APRIL 63	NUMBER OF VILLAGES	935	731	139	348	390
	RURAL POPULATION	6,724,000	3,356,000	609,000	962,000	857,000
	% OF RURAL POPULATION	54%	27%	5%	7%	7%
CHANGES JUL 62 TO APRIL 63	NUMBER OF VILLAGES	+ 76	+ 21	+ 105	-74	-64
	RURAL POPULATION	+ 924,000	-266,000	+ 472,000	-740,000	-300,000
	% OF RURAL POPULATION	+ 7%	-2%	+ 4%	-7%	-2%

NOTE: IN ORDER TO PRESENT A BETTER PICTURE OF CONTROL OF RURAL VIETNAM, 1,600,000 POPULATION OF AUTONOMOUS CITIES OF SAIGON, DANANG, HUE, AND DALAT UNDER GVN CONTROL WAS NOT USED IN THIS STUDY. (POPULATIONS ARE ESTIMATES)

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in the face of these cautiously optimistic and hopefully pessimistic reports, was to continue its established program of material support coupled with attempts to influence Diem to make desired changes.

VII. THE PATH TO THE END

A. Diem's Position Hardens

The obvious U.S. alternatives, by mid-1963, remained the same as they were in late 1961: (1) to induce changes within the Strategic Hamlet Program (among others) by convincing Diem to make such changes; (2) to allow Diem to run things his own way and hope for the best; and (3) to find an alternative to President Diem. The U.S. continued to pursue the first course; Diem insisted increasingly on the second. Finally, due to pressures from areas other than the Strategic Hamlet Program, the U.S. pursued the third alternative. The Strategic Hamlet Program, in the event, died with its sponsors.

Far from becoming more reasonable, in U.S. eyes, President Diem by mid-1963 had become more intractable. He insisted, for example, that the U.S. cease to have an operational voice in the Strategic Hamlet Program. The multiplication of U.S. advisors at many levels, he claimed, was the source of friction and dissension. The remedy was to remove the advisors. 105/ The essence of Diem's position was that Taylor's "limited partnership" would not work.

Other U.S. missions visited Vietnam to assess the conduct of the war. The result was much the same as reported by Krulak and Mendenhall. This was essentially the findings of the McNamara-Taylor mission in September: the military campaign is progressing, political disaffection is growing; U.S. leverage is questionable. 106/

B. The Program Dies With the Ngos

The rest may be summarized: the U.S. attempted to insist on a program with more emphasis on broad appeal rather than control; Diem, finding himself increasingly embroiled in the Buddhist controversy, increased repressive measures; a coup toppled the Diem regime on 1 November; the deposed President and his brother Nhu, "architect of the Strategic Hamlet Program," were killed. The Strategic Hamlet Program-- or at least the program under that name which they had made the unifying theme of their counterinsurgent effort--died with them. The inhabitants who had wanted to leave the hamlets did so in the absence of an effective government. The VC took advantage of the confusion to attack and overrun others. Some offered little or no resistance. The ruling junta attempted to resuscitate the program as "New Life Hamlets" early in 1964, but the failures of the past provided a poor psychological basis upon which to base hopes for the future.

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VIII. AN INCONCLUSIVE SUMMARY

The dominant U.S. view has been that the Strategic Hamlet Program failed because of over-expansion and the establishment of hamlets in basically insecure areas. 107/ That there was overexpansion and the establishment of many poorly defended hamlets is not questioned. This contributed, beyond doubt, to the failure of the program. But this view finesses the problem of the process for which the strategic hamlets were but the tangible symbol. The present analysis has sought to emphasize both the essentially political nature of the objective of the Strategic Hamlet Program and the political nature of the context in which the process evolved -- of expectations, bargaining, and attempts to exert influence on other participants in policy formulation and implementation. In this context it is the U.S. inability to exert leverage on President Diem (or Diem's inability to reform) that emerges as the principal cause of failure.

Yet, both of these attempts to pinpoint the reasons why the strategic hamlet program did not succeed fail to get at another whole issue: the validity of that body of writings which one may call the theory and doctrine of counterinsurgency. Neither the military nor the political aspects of this doctrine can be upheld (or proved false) by an examination of the Strategic Hamlet Program. Quite aside from whether or not Diem was able to broaden the program's appeal to the peasantry, what would have occurred had he made a determined and sustained effort to do so? Would this have led in some more-or-less direct way to stability or to even greater dissatisfaction? We simply do not know. The question is as unanswerable as whether the appetite grows with the eating or is satisfied by it. The contention here is that claims of mismanagement are not sufficient to conclude that better management would necessarily have produced the desired results.

In the military sphere the unanswerable questions are different. It is said that the military phase of the Strategic Hamlet Program progressed reasonably well in many areas; the failure was in the political end of the process. But did the military actions succeed? Might failures to develop adequate intelligence and to weed out VC infrastructure in these hamlets not as easily be attributable to the fact that the inhabitants knew they were not really safe from VC intimidation and reprisals? Does the analogy to an "oil spot" have operational meaning when small bands can carry out hit and run raids or when many small bands can concentrate in one location and achieve surprise? Where is the key to this vicious circle -- or is there a key?

In conclusion, while the abortive Strategic Hamlet Program of 1961-1963 may teach one something, the available record does not permit one to conclude either that the program fell because of the failure of a given phase or that other phases were, in fact, adequate to the challenge. One may say that the program was doomed by poor execution and by the inability of the Ngo family to reform coupled with the inability of the U.S. to induce them to reform. The evidence does not warrant one to proceed further.



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IV. B. 2

FOOTNOTES

1. Sir Robert Thompson, Defeating Communist Insurgency (New York: Praeger, 1966), p. 123.
2. Seven Years of the Ngo Dinh Diem Administration, 1954-1961 (Saigon: 26 October 1961), pp. 357-380.
3. See J.J. Lasloff, "Rural Resettlement in South Vietnam: The Argoville Program", Pacific Affairs, Vol. XXXV, Nr 4 (Winter 1962-63), pp. 327-340.
4. Despatch, Saigon to State Nr 278, 7 March 1960, Intelligence Report Nr 2137261, p. 14 (S/NF)
5. William A. Nighswonger, Rural Pacification in Vietnam (New York: Praeger, 1966), p. 46.
6. SNIE 10-4-61, 7 November 1961, Probable Communist Reactions in South Vietnam, p. 3 (TS)
7. Briefing Paper, n.d., The North Vietnamese Role in the Origin, Direction, and Support of the War in South Vietnam, p. iv (S); State Department Bureau of Intelligence and Research, RFE-3, 1 November 1961, Communist Threat Mounts in South Vietnam, p. 4 (S)
8. Ibid., p. 5
9. NIE 50-61, 28 March 1961, Outlook in Mainland Southeast Asia, p. 7 (S)
10. MAAG, Vietnam, 1 September 1961, First Twelve Month Report of Chief MAAG, Vietnam, p. 10 (S)
11. U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, 89th Congress, 2nd Session, Background Information Relating to Southeast Asia and Vietnam (2nd Revised Ed.), Washington, GPO, 1966, pp. 86-7.
12. Letter of Transmittal to President Diem and President Kennedy, n.d. (June 1961), Joint Action Program Proposed by the Viet Nam-United States Special Financial Groups (S)
13. See Ibid., Introduction, p. 1, passim.

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14. Letter, President Kennedy to General Maxwell D. Taylor, 13 October 1961 (C)
15. Report on General Taylor's Mission to South Vietnam, 3 November 1961, bound in loose leaf with letter of transmittal, evaluations and conclusions, and Appendices A-I. (TS) Cited hereafter as Taylor Report. All references are to the section on evaluations and conclusions.
16. Ibid., p. 2
17. Ibid., p. 3
18. Ibid., p. 8
19. Ibid., pp. 6-7.
20. Ibid., p. 9
21. Ibid., p. 7
22. Ibid., p. 14
23. Ibid., See also pp. 11-16.
24. Ibid., pp. 11-12
25. The plan, cited hereafter as CIP-1960, is contained as an inclosure to Despatch Nr. 276, Saigon to State, 4 January 1961, Counter Insurgency Plan for South Vietnam. (S)
26. Despatch Nr. 276, Saigon to State, op. cit., p.3
27. See for example, Ibid., Annex B.
28. MAAG Vietnam, 15 September 1961, Geographically Phased National Level Operation Plan for Counterinsurgency (C) (Secret), cited hereafter as Geographically Phased Counterinsurgency Plan.
29. Ibid., pp. A1-A3.
30. Ibid., pp. A3-A4.
31. Ibid., pp. A4-A7.
32. Ibid., p. C2.

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35. Study, RGK Thompson to President Diem, 27 October 1961, Appreciation of Vietnam, November 1961-April 1962 (S), Incl. to letter Lt. Gen. Lionel C. McGarr to Secretary of Defense, 20 November 1961, SecDef Control Nr. 2654 (S).
36. Ibid.
37. Ibid.
38. Copies of Thompson's covering letter and memorandum to Diem are enclosed with msg, Saigon to State, Nr. 205, 20 November 1961, Thompson Mission Recommendations to President Diem (S). The memorandum is cited hereafter as Thompson Memorandum.
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40. Ibid., letter of transmittal. (Emphasis added).
41. Letter, McGarr to Admiral H.D. Felt (CINCPAC), 27 November 1961 (S), Incl. to letter, McGarr to Secretary of Defense, 27 November 1961, op. cit.
42. Ibid.
43. Ibid.
44. U.S. Military Advisory Group, CHMAAG Guidance Paper to Field Advisors in Counter Insurgency, Fourth Revision, 10 February 1962, Tactics and Techniques of Counterinsurgent Operations (S)
45. Despatch Nr. 205, Saigon to State, 20 November 1961, op. cit.
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The third principle is Hilsman's own contribution, drawing heavily on his personal experiences with the OSS during World War II.
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53. Personal notes of Assistant Secretary of Defense Arthur Sylvester, 16 December 1961, SecDef Conference, Honolulu.
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55. Ibid.
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