



Does Vietnam Need A Supreme Commander?

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TOWARD the end of last year the word passed around Saigon that April would be a pretty good time to be in Vietnam. The logistical bottlenecks associated with the U.S. buildup would have been removed, and General William C. Westmoreland would, it was said, be in a position to take the offensive and to attack the main-force Vietcong formations in strength. If 1965 was the year in which the formidable and rapid arrival of American divisions prevented a Vietcong take-over, then the second quarter of 1966 would see the foundations laid for victory.

The early portents were good. Every time they met in a major engagement the American forces proved themselves superior to either the Vietcong or the People's Army of Vietnam flocking down the Ho Chi Minh Trail from North Vietnam. To counter U.S. air and artillery support, the Communist forces tried new protective and offensive tactics. They dug their trenches deeper and narrower and closer to their assault positions. In pressing the attack, however, they moved into hand-to-

hand combat with haste and zeal that often proved suicidal. Dedicated and indoctrinated though they were, they were not good enough to match American firepower. Yet, though April has long passed and the wettest wet season in many a year has now drenched the High Plateau and the Mekong Delta, the talk is no longer about an American-led offensive but of what major actions the Vietcong may initiate before the wet season ends, and why it has not struck already.

History Repeated

In August, 1961, in an examination of the situation then existing in South Vietnam, I reported in this magazine that the Vietcong forces consisted of perhaps fifteen thousand guerrillas, of whom about half had firearms. "Some of the rifles and almost all of the mines and booby traps are home-made, and, though lethal enough, are extremely primitive," I wrote. "They were also extremely primitive during the Indo-China war. . . . The Vietcong, it is clear, is being raised on the same hard rations."

The Vietcong's numerical and tactical development has followed the Vietminh pattern meticulously and successfully. The highly advanced American technical skills have necessitated some adaptations; in broad outline, however, and often in precise details, the Vietminh handbook has been followed. To read General Vo Nguyen Giap's contribution to the booklet, "Days with Ho Chi Minh," is to understand the extension of the cadre system in the mountains of northern Tonkin, the patient political indoctrination, and the spreading of Communist control into the hamlets and villages of Indo-China a generation and more ago as a prelude to the slow development of armed insurgency. It is also to understand what happened in South Vietnam between 1956 and 1960. Just as the first platoon of the Vietminh Liberation Army, which was formed on December 22, 1944, grew in ten years into a regular army of more than a quarter of a million men, the Vietcong since 1961 has multiplied and by the same methods. The Vietminh used the China sanctuary to create their

regular divisions and shipped them back into Tonkin through the porte de Chine. North Vietnam and the Ho Chi Minh Trail have served similar purposes for the Vietcong.

As late as August, 1963, the then Chief of Staff of MAC-V (Military Assistance Command—Vietnam) assured me in Saigon that the Vietcong could never operate in more than company strength without inviting immediate destruction. His fear was that the Communists would go underground! In round figures today, the Vietcong has a quarter of a million men under arms. Of these, ninety thousand are main-force regulars, armed and equipped with first-rate weapons, including 120-mm. mortars and recoilless rifles, and organized into roughly 140 battalions, of which about fifty have come from North Vietnam.

These forces are controlled by some twenty-five regimental headquarters, which in recent months have tended to act multilaterally on a divisional basis. Even though full-scale, highly concentrated divisional attacks are improbable, the Vietcong forces have certainly begun to reveal an impressive standard of organizational capacity. Indeed, the co-ordinated deployment of troops on a two-regiment basis has been tested enough to indicate that the Vietcong is now seriously considering even larger-scale action. This is not to suggest that it is prepared to embark on suicidal mass assaults, although it might if it believed a quick military success, however costly, would help to win a big political victory.

WHAT is more probable is that it will use divisional formations on scattered operations designed to weaken even more the ailing Saigon morale. With the possible exception of Pleiku, which is protected by its open terrain, the entire High Plateau is vulnerable. Ban Me Thuot, the capital of Darlac Province, with its scarlet flamboyant trees shading the streets and its clip-clopping mountain ponies, is held in pawn by the Vietcong. To the north, Kontum is surrounded by both jungle and the Vietcong. Fifty-six Vietcong and North Vietnamese battalions have been identified here in the II Corps area,

and reinforcements are spilling out of the Ho Chi Minh Trail through Laos and Cambodia at the rate of about 7,500 a month. This compares with about a thousand a month last December and an estimated 4,500 to 5,000 in March.

Superficially, the Mekong Delta, so long the cause of such grave anxiety, seems in better shape these days. The Vietcong have relatively few of their hard-core forces there; but this in itself is no cause for complacency, since the Vietcong use the Mekong Delta as the Vietminh used the Red River Delta—as a source of manpower, money, rice, and consumer goods. Even against the limited capabilities of the



French Union Forces, the Vietminh quickly learned its own vulnerabilities in open delta country, and its effort there always maintained a guerrilla character. It was sufficient for the Vietminh's needs to keep the delta invested and to maintain freedom of access to its human and material resources. Though additional regular formations, sometimes of divisional strength, had to be infiltrated into the Red River Delta from time to time to counter French pacification plans, major military undertakings were reserved for areas where the terrain provided the means for surprise. With the skies of South Vietnam now filled with helicopters and L-19s, the Vietcong has found the open Mekong Delta no place for massing formations.

"With their helicopters and air power and general mobility, the Americans can create their own terrain," said a western intelligence

officer. "The Vietcong can win half battles, but they cannot win whole victories. They can take Kontum, or even Hué, if they want to, but they cannot and dare not attempt to hold these or any other major towns."

The Ratio That Matters

These Vietcong liabilities are attributable to the rapid American military buildup, which has brought to Vietnam more than a quarter of a million U.S. troops in the past year, and which, without any doubt or qualification, saved the country from a Vietcong military victory twelve months ago. This immense achievement should not be understated, but the equally important factor in this situation is that General Westmoreland's spring offensive did not materialize because six or so American divisions are simply not adequate for the task.

American operations are bolder, bigger, and better than anything the French attempted in the Indo-China war, but they are in essence only an extension of the cautious daytime patrols the French used to make before returning to their concrete and barbed wire at night. Certainly, the Vietcong main forces must be harried, but search and destroy is not a substitute for secure and hold. It may produce a high kill ratio, perhaps the most fatuous indicator of the war, but it does not increase the ratio of those living under government control to those living under the Vietcong, which in a politico-military war such as this is the only ratio that matters.

The tactical changes necessary in my view to reverse this situation are not practicable now. Given the command system, the distribution and availability of human resources, and the disheartening failure of even the B-52s to interdict or even seriously to slow down the ever-expanding capabilities of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, there is not enough manpower, Vietnamese or American, in the country to do the job. Moreover, to introduce significant additional American forces under existing circumstances would be to exacerbate present social and economic grievances and provide militant Buddhist leaders such as Thich Tri Quang with material

that could easily be exploited to the Vietcong's advantage.

The dictates of the situation a year ago did not permit any delay, or even the careful planning that the domestic Vietnamese situation demanded. The result is that the essential American buildup has had long-range side effects that threaten to neutralize the immediate military advantages. Militarily, the situation is infinitely better than it was this time last year, but in every other way it is much worse. Victory is no less remote because defeat has been temporarily averted.

MY CURRENT VISIT to Vietnam coincided with that of an expatriate Vietnamese official with whom I have exchanged views dating back sixteen years to Hanoi, where he was the first to warn of the nature and extent of the Vietminh buildup at Dienbienphu. This time he sounded another grave warning.

ing tree-lined boulevards. It has become the dirtiest, sleaziest, and most squalid city in the Far East. To help avert the diseases that many feel sure will soon spread and to reduce the stench that pervades the city, residents have taken to burning the rat-infested heaps of garbage, some several feet high, that choke the sidewalks. The results are scarcely effective.

Strictly speaking, I suppose, this is not an American problem. This is certainly the official attitude, though how MAC-V can reconcile the maintenance of its headquarters on a muck heap is a perplexing reversal of the usual military interest in spit and polish.

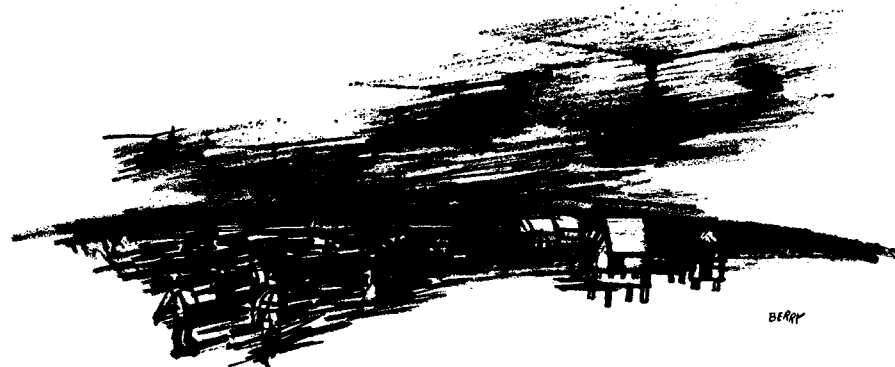
Throughout the country one finds that Saigon has become a symbol for malfeasance. At the immense rural reconstruction training center at Vung Tau, for instance, I found the chief instructor deploring the "rottenness and corruption of the

men now carry guns to defend themselves not merely from the Vietcong.

The extent to which this general decline in standards is reflected in the morale of the armed forces is a highly sensitive subject. Official American figures suggest that desertion is seasonal and worst around the New Year celebrations. Nevertheless, South Vietnamese Army desertions for the first four months of this year were three times higher than main-force Vietcong and People's Army desertions. In one division last year, six thousand troops decided to give up the fight. It would be excessively optimistic not to expect a high rate of desertion this year in the Hué-based First Division, once about the best in the country, or to suggest that the Buddhist crisis will not seriously affect the fighting qualities of the army generally. This is true also of the poorly treated and inadequately paid popular forces. Even the best of these troops, including those least likely to be affected by Buddhist upheavals and other crises, are inclined just to wander off. For instance, last February desertion accounted for a force of six hundred highly regarded Nung mercenaries in the I Corps shrinking to 105.

Another characteristic of the current scene is the increase in regionalism, most notably in the I Corps in central Vietnam, and in warlordism generally. President Ngo Dinh Diem used to keep such a tight control on his regional commanders that he often intervened directly in military operations. Only in central Vietnam, where his brother Ngo Dinh Can ruled with an iron hand, was there anything in the nature of regional autonomy. Today the regional commanders are often publicly contemptuous and openly defiant of Saigon, while corps and divisional commanders closer to the source of power and authority talk and plot coups.

To crush the Buddhist threat in Hué and Danang, the Ky régime at one stage committed more than a third of its entire strategic reserve. To guard against a coup d'état it had one Mekong Delta division on constant alert to move into Saigon, where it had also stationed five of the ten recently trained companies of mobile police whose deployment in the field was scheduled to be an



"Conditions in South Vietnam are very bad and turning worse and worse," he told me. "Inflation, corruption, and government inefficiency all add up to an awful mess." His conclusions are inescapable. "It is tragic but true that the American effort to save Vietnam seems liable to become a significant factor in its eventual fall," was the comment of another Vietnamese.

What both Vietnamese had in mind is immediately apparent in Saigon and to a lesser extent in most other Vietnamese cities. American help came pouring in and Vietnam burst at the seams. In parts of Saigon the sewage system no longer works because it simply cannot cope with the load. Saigon used to be an ethereal place, with pretty girls flitting like butterflies along charm-

Saigon government" in whose name the men he was training are meant to rally the population to fight the Vietcong. Corruption begins at the highest level of government and runs all the way to the Vung Tau gatekeepers, who for five piastres close their eyes to students who want to slip out at night.

Threats Within

Law and justice have always been in disrepute in Saigon, but order used to be reasonably well maintained, if only by self-discipline. Today the law is the law of the knife and the gun. A newspaper publisher who narrowly escaped assassination could identify his assailant, but the man went scot-free. The Vietcong created the conditions that have led to this lawlessness, of course, but

integral part of the all-important rural reconstruction program.

I recount this bleak story of corruption, inefficiency, and chaos not to plead the case for cutting our losses in Vietnam, but simply to press the cause for long-overdue command and tactical changes. The government's problems appear somewhat less horrendous when matched against the Vietcong's own formidable problems and difficulties, including peasant resentment against higher taxation, forced labor and recruitment, and military and morale frustrations, to name only a few. Still, it is a wholly unjustified assumption to believe that time is necessarily on our side. To talk of carrying on the war for five years or ten years or even longer, and to pretend that social and economic grievances don't matter, is to overlook the political realities in Vietnam—and the pressures against the war that may be generated in countries far from Saigon, not excluding the United States.

A FUNDAMENTAL weakness in the American position is in the nature of its relationship with the Saigon government. Mighty American efforts sometimes produce mice. When Maxwell Taylor and U. Alexis Johnson took over at the American embassy, it was predicted with confidence that for every dollar's worth of aid Vietnam consumed it would also consume a dollar's worth of advice. But even now the consumption of advice would not run to more than a few cents in the dollar. For fear of raising the bogey of colonialism, the joint command system, which the war so clearly demanded long before the American forces became a major factor in the government's effort, was rejected, and the succession of military juntas and their fragmented regional offshoots have continued to ask for, and to take, only the advice they wanted. Nothing is more certain, for instance, than that American military advice in the I Corps area would have been heavily against the decision to fire General Nguyen Chanh Thi on March 11.

With the U.S. forces (255,000 at the end of April) rapidly overtaking the South Vietnamese Army's strength (316,000) but still far from adequate to fulfill the hopes of anything more

than search-and-destroy operations, Washington has clearly reached the conclusion that if General Westmoreland is to undertake the offensive phase optimistically predicted for April, there must be heavy military reinforcement. On the basis of the present strength of the Vietcong, the need is for an additional four to six divisions. Since native manpower resources are taxed to their limit in



Vietnam by dual Vietcong and government recruiting and, on the government side, by the need for a rational distribution of resources to meet the demands of regular, regional, and popular forces, the expanding police force, and rural reconstruction, the increase in combat forces can come only from the United States. The war, as the casualty figures now reflect, is very much an American war. It will stay that way.

Since that is the case, I believe that there is now a strong argument for winning Saigon's acceptance of a Supreme Allied Commander. It is not enough, as I have suggested, to meet immediate military needs by bringing in more troops. It is equally important that their presence should not create further economic and social problems. A Supreme Commander would always be deeply concerned with such matters. Graft and corruption among

the military (and the non-military) of any nationality, the unauthorized movement of troops (whether Vietnamese or American and for whatever purpose), the wildly inflationary effects of G.I. purchasing, the collapse of municipal services, the alienation of public opinion by widespread and uncontrolled prostitution—all these and many other side effects of the war would properly be responsibilities of a Supreme Commander and his staff. However difficult politically, it would be essential to name an American to the post.

The Priorities

The time has also come, I believe, to re-examine the role of the Vietnamese forces. Between 1954 and 1960, American generals created the South Vietnamese Army from the hodge-podge of forces left over from the Indo-China war. They organized it into corps and divisions, and, using the experience of the Korean War, trained and equipped it to guard the nation's frontiers. They left it in ignorance about the techniques of wars of national liberation.

Once made, this basic error could not easily be mended while the Vietcong was busy increasing from the guerrilla formations into regular units of company and battalion size, and the main responsibility for defense rested on the South Vietnamese Army.

The introduction of large-scale main-force North Vietnamese on the one side and American forces on the other, however, has radically changed this situation. Because of their alien nature, there are obvious restrictions on the roles both of these forces may play in the war. The fifty-plus North Vietnamese battalions now in South Vietnam would be wasted on the patient guerrilla-cum-subversion activities that form a large part of the Vietcong's effort. They are Communist assault forces. Similarly, to use American forces in direct support of pacification programs is also to waste military power and skill. To use that old cliché again, the battle for the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese peasant must be fought by Vietnamese and no one else.

In theory, to win the war is easy. To begin with, it requires

that main-force Vietcong and North Vietnamese units be excluded from the populated areas, so that pacification plans may proceed unhampered by more than containable guerrilla action. This involves the deployment of regular units to drive out Vietcong main forces and to enlarge the areas under control, coupled with adequate regional and popular forces to provide security within the areas under pacification. In the past, however, neither the regular nor the regional forces have been adequate for the dual task. Ngo Dinh Nhu's strategic-hamlet program collapsed because it failed to provide security for the villagers, and this has been true of every pacification program since. In Quang Ngai Province today, for example, well-armed forty-man political-action teams, unable to cope with the increasing strength of North Vietnamese and Vietcong regulars, fight as infantry companies.

SINCE the United States is fully committed to the war, a sensible change in priorities would suggest that the South Vietnamese Army should become the principal pacification force, while American and other Allied troops should be chiefly responsible for dealing with main-force Communist battalions beyond the pacification zones. This would not merely be a realistic distribution of effort; it would also help bring under control the unreliable Vietnamese corps commands. This is not to suggest that the South Vietnamese Army should be relieved of combat duty. On the contrary, the fighting forces required to secure and hold against the Vietcong guerrillas are only slightly less impressive than those necessary to defeat the enemy's main elements.

Admittedly, the arguments against such measures are strong. But to one who has watched the conflict in Indo-China for sixteen years, it now seems clear that the rudderless direction in Saigon has become the main threat to successful prosecution of the war. If U.S. prestige and influence are really at stake here, as I believe they are, then Washington may soon have no alternative but to provide the co-ordination and the direction without which the war will almost certainly be lost.



Geneva, 1954: The Broken Mold

VICTOR BATOR

FOR ALL their differences, many of the leading participants in the Vietnam debate seem to agree that the military and political provisions of the Geneva Agreements of 1954 offer the best basis for peace negotiations. The point has been argued, with different emphasis to be sure, by Senator J. William Fulbright and Secretary of State Dean Rusk, by Ambassador Arthur J. Goldberg and Prime Minister Harold Wilson. As the French diplomat Jean Chauvel put it in *Le Monde* in January after a round of official visits in Asia, "No matter where one turns, Washington, Peking, Hanoi, or the National Liberation Front, all take their cues from the joint declaration of the Geneva Conference." But can the emergency solutions adopted twelve summers ago be applied to the crisis in Southeast Asia today?

The Geneva Agreements of July, 1954, were reached at a conference of nine states. Five of them—France, the People's Republic of China, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, and the United States—were non-Indo-Chinese, "outsiders," as it were. The other four—Cambodia, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North), Laos, and the State of Vietnam (South)—were parts of the old French Indo-China. The signed documents of the conference were six unilateral declarations by Cambodia, France, and Laos—two from each, with none from either of the two Vietnams—and three armistice agreements, one each for Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam.

The "Agreement on Cessation of Hostilities in Vietnam" contains six chapters with forty-seven articles and an annex. Chapters I, II, IV, and V deal, respectively, with a provisional demarcation line separating the north and south zones, with the cessation of hostilities, with the exchange of prisoners of war and internees, and with miscellaneous details. There are provisions in them to prevent reprisals, to secure democratic liberties, and to assure the right of choice of domicile. Chapter VI deals with a joint commission of the two armies—the People's Army of Vietnam and French Union Forces—and with an international supervisory commission that was to control and supervise the cease-fire. These five chapters clearly state that the parties to the agreement are not governments but the two opposing army commands, the People's Army and the French Union Forces. Chapter III provides that no military personnel, war matériel, or new military bases shall be introduced, nor shall any military bases under the control of a foreign state be allowed, or military alliances or either area (north and south of the demarcation line) be used to further an aggressive policy.

Drawing the Line

The political dispositions were all supposed to be contained in a document entitled the "Final Declaration of the Geneva Conference." This document, which remained unsigned, had no contracting parties and no