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U.S. AIMS AND LEVERAGE IN VIETNAM, 1950-65

Working Notes on Vietnam No. 1

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PREFACE TO "WORKING NOTES ON VIETNAM" SERIES

Many RAND researchers never put out D's as unpolished or incomplete as these. Others do. With this series of D's, I move, at last, from the first group to the second: in the interests of communication, stimulation, and in particular, I hope, feedback of thoughts and reactions to me.

Over recent years, especially the last, I have filled many notebooks with reflections and comments on Vietnam as they occurred to me; mostly in fragmentary or outline form. This series of papers, in the first instance, collects those comments by subject and presents them, hastily filled out and edited, in typescript. Rather than polish them or, more importantly, follow through the analysis in any one paper, I have decided to move a fair number of these notes as quickly as possible toward readers who might be moved to comment; for my benefit, and perhaps, in some cases, for theirs. The growing interest at RAND in active work on "Lessons of Vietnam" and Lessons of Rebellion has especially encouraged me to issue these notes to RAND readers at this time, rough as they are.

The notes are appearing in no particular order, but are numbered consecutively for reference. Although I'm already aware that each of these is incomplete, don't let that inhibit your criticism or comments.

U.S. LEVERAGE ON ALLIES IN VIETNAM

The American struggle against the Vietnamese Communists did not begin in 1961. It began, as the Vietnamese themselves are well aware, early in 1950 when the Truman Administration recognized the Government of Bao Dai -- ostensibly independent but actually a puppet of the French, and so recognized by virtually every Vietnamese whom we later came to support -- and authorized the first \$10,000,000 to the French in their fight against Ho Chi Minh.

It is curious that we came out of that association with our belief intact that we had never participated in a lost war. For in the light of the Administration purposes in joining that fight (not with combat forces but with equipment and a great deal of money, and with all the moral encouragement and suasion to continue we could bring to bear) that war ended in the defeat of our aim, which was the military defeat and the destruction of the communist-led forces. Since that defeat of a Western army was in the same country where we are now fighting essentially the same organization with the same goals on each side, it is natural to ask what lessons we might learn from the circumstances of that earlier failure.

In 1954 and in 1961, we seemed to have made little effort to address this question, taking it for granted that the situation was so different that analogies would be useless. This is a good point in time from which to examine the validity of that belief. The fact is that a number of similarities leap out as soon as one lays the 1950-1954 and the 1954-1969 periods side by side. Some of the less obvious ones (relying on insiders' knowledge) have to do with the United States aims and roles -- public and private -- in the conflicts, and their impact on our leverage and probable involvement. This paper focusses only upon this last question.

First of all, one notices that the U.S. did not immediately in '54, or '61, or ever, simply adopt the role of one of the other players, the French, from the earlier scenario. Rather, it found itself pursuing the same role as in the earlier period: that of advisor and supporter to another government which was seen as carrying the responsibility for

administration and fighting.

Not that, in either case, we thought that the stakes of the U.S. in the outcome of the fighting were limited, or indeed, were in any sense less than for the power to whom we ascribed primary responsibility.

True, at various times Administration leaders said just that, for U.S. public consumption: "It is their fight, and they have got to win it." But that was always misleading as to the internal perceptions of the national security bureaucracy and most of these same leaders, which would have been better expressed: "In view of our national interest, it is our fight, but they have got to win it for us; because if they don't, we might have to." Indeed, the continuity in the appreciation of the nature and the very high importance of the stakes by successive American administrations is most striking. The "Domino Theory" acquired only its title from Eisenhower's Republican Administration; in every respect, and with the same degree of urgency, it was enunciated and fully accepted by the preceding Democratic Administration of Truman, Acheson and Rusk. (Rusk? Yes, that gentleman was acting Deputy Under Secretary of State at the time the Administration decided to recognize Bao Dai and aid the French, and is on record at that time, in the name of the State Department, as urging the deployment of U.S. resources to prevent further communist encroachment in Indochina and Southeast Asia.)

At the same time, there was an evident doubt in the minds of bureaucrats and leadership in each successive administration that the U.S. public or Congress would accept the same view of the importance of U.S. interests in that area, as measured by a willingness to commit U.S. combat forces. Hence, as suggested above, Truman and Eisenhower were anxious that the war be won with French and Vietnamese troops rather than American, just as Kennedy preferred the later war won with Vietnamese troops.

What lessons might we have learned from our experience as advisor to the French, relevant to our experience in advising the GVN? We concluded by 1953 to 1954 that our advisory effort had been almost wholly impotent and ineffective. Since our accomplishments after 15 years of advising the GVN and ARVN differ from this, at most, only in a small

degree, it is interesting to consider in what respects the reasons may be the same.

In both cases, a close look reveals, the potential leverage wielded by the United States as sanction for its "advice" was very weak. Given the importance of the conflict in our eyes -- which we made no attempt to conceal, in private, from the ally -- along with our evident reluctance to call upon the U.S. public to accept U.S. combat involvement, a threat to withdraw or even to reduce our support had little credibility. At the same time, the changes in policy we "advised" were, in the eyes of the advisee, radical and unwelcome, or totally unacceptable.

For example, what we regarded as the key to a successful effort against the Viet Minh was for the French to announce a convincing plan for the transfer of total independence to the Vietnamese; only this, we thought, could subtract enough public support from the cause of Viet Minh and transfer it to the anti-communist effort. Without this, we believed the struggle was hopeless; with it, we thought, victory was "possible" and, in some eyes, even likely. Yet for the French to have accepted this demand would have been to abandon their whole purpose in fighting. There was no basis for expectation, or even for reasonable hope, that the French would accept this advice, and go on fighting. And we had no sanctions whatever to compel them to do so. (In Europe, as well, we were in the position of suitor, hoping -- also in vain, it turned out -- for the French to ratify EDC). Yet we continued to support -- indeed, to press the French to maintain -- an effort that all our intelligence analyses implied was consequently hopeless: in the tacit hope, one must presume, that these analyses were wrong. (More cynically, and without direct evidence, one might guess at a desire in 1951-52 of a Democratic Administration, under fire for "losing China," that the "fall of Indochina" at least be postponed till the next Administration.)

After 1954, just as before, U.S. leaders privately saw the avoidance of communist takeover of all Vietnam as of high importance to the U.S. -- justifying great commitments and inputs. However, as before, they also saw a necessity to keep current costs low, if at all possible: because of doubt whether the U.S. public would put as high a value on the outcome as they did, and also because of doubt whether the aims could be achieved at all. Hence, they again hoped urgently that we could induce others to do the fighting, take the responsibility and the casualties, leaving us only with the dollar burden.

This "bargain" -- as with the French, now with the GVN -- seemed always in danger of breaking down, leaving us with a loss of South Vietnam (and of our prior investment) or with a necessity to take over the combat ourselves. Hence, we rarely felt we could afford to strain the bargain by pressuring our ally into fighting better or differently, or into taking political measures to which it was, in fact, adamantly opposed, even when we suspected that such changes were critical to success. In effect, we had no leverage to use to these intermediate ends, and had to forego them: despite a perception that the military-political challenge of the NLF would almost surely grow, and the ability of the GVN/RVNAF to meet it would decline, unless these changes did occur. Once again, we could only hope that our best-informed perceptions were wrong. And hoping, we clutched at indicators -- occasionally provided by lack of overt VC activity during a planning/preparing phase, as in much of 1962, and later in 1967 -- that this was the case.

Meanwhile, as an essential part of the bargain with our ally (serving to keep it in power, fighting), we provided verbal and symbolic encouragement and evidence of U.S. concern and commitment: not unlimited, but not small. This came "cheap" in terms of current demands on the U.S. public; but was making ever more likely the provision of U.S. combat forces if that became essential to holding Vietnam.

To convince the GVN (and its Vietnamese critics and rivals), in lieu of sending U.S. troops immediately, that we would do "whatever necessary" to support them, we had to say so publicly, and to assert that major U.S. interests were at stake. To get sizeable enough sums of

money out of Congress, we had to say, again, that major U.S. interests were at stake, but at the same time imply that there was very little likelihood these would lead to U.S. combat involvement. The only way these requirements could be harmonized was to profess, at any given time, great optimism for the results of the GVN's performance if the U.S. aid were sent (combined with pessimism, and the prospects of major losses for the U.S., if it were not).

Public emphasis that the value of U.S. aid was conditional upon major changes in policy or makeup of the GVN (as our analyses concluded privately) would not have been conducive to getting money out of Congress. And it would have strained our relations with the GVN, and its viability. Yet lack of such statements, along with what we did say to Congress, further decreased our leverage with the GVN. When John F. Kennedy did finally express this view in mid-1963, it helped bring the GVN down in ruins, demonstrating the risks of such efforts to get and use greater leverage. Much earlier, perhaps in 1956-58, such tactics might have had a more tempered and beneficial effect; and as late as 1961, the downfall of the regime might have been less immediately dangerous.

Meanwhile, our public posture affected internal interpretation and reporting. Reporting and analysis that supported our public position was "helpful" and welcome, while "pessimism" was at best painful, if not dangerous, particularly in periods (like 1963-64 and 1966) when our policy seemed not to be working. In periods like 1962 when the policy seemed to be working despite its neglect of factors considered, by some, critical to success, it was easy to doubt and forget such warnings. Pessimism regarding an ongoing policy is a fragile, unstable phenomenon within the government.

These U.S. policies had the effect of holding South Vietnam out of communist hands "cheaply" -- i.e. without sizeable numbers of U.S. combat troops -- for 15 years, from 1950 to 1965. Yet they also locked together, along with internal U.S. Government views of the stakes and with the actual, foreseeable behavior of the GVN/ARVN and the VC/DRV to produce a high probability that U.S. troops would end up fighting in South Vietnam: i.e., that they would be sent if necessary; and that

they would be necessary. We failed to foresee this. In part this was because, as our military involvement and hence the influence of military thinking upon U.S. policymaking grew in Vietnam from 1961 on, the perception submerged of the essentiality of political change (and of administrative, military and police reform as well). Likewise for the earlier perception of limited chances of success at best, even with attempts at such change.

In 1965 when U.S. troops were finally committed, we need no longer have felt the earlier constraints on exerting leverage on our ally to bring about change and reform: in the interests of long-run aims, and particularly to limit the scale of U.S. combat involvement that would be needed in the mid and long-term. No longer was the participation of the allied military forces immediately critical to avoiding defeat; no longer did the possible fall of a given allied regime pose fatal risks, whatever its costs. But ironically, with this very same change in the situation, greatly lowering the risks of leverage, the sense of priorities of the U.S. military establishment became even more dominant and the desire of Administration leaders for quick victory or at least quick and sure improvement became much more urgent. For both reasons, tolerance for even the smaller remaining risks of a tougher policy towards the GVN declined along with the risks themselves. So this opportunity for leverage was not to be perceived as such.

However, attitudes deprecating the need and emphasizing the risks of pressure on the GVN for fundamental change were by no means confined to the military; most higher civilian officials shared them, both before and after 1965, though the reasons varied over time.

Before 1965, pressure on the GVN to get it to make reforms needed to enable it, in the long-run, not only to defeat the Viet Cong, but to hold its own without U.S. troops, had been generally dropped or avoided for fear it would lead to GVN resistance to our technical advice and support, or to unwillingness to pursue the war, or to collapse of the GVN and the war effort, or (in late 1964 -- early 1965) to collapse of the GVN facade necessary to justify U.S. combat intervention (by then essential). After 1965, none of these inhibitions applied, or at least



were so urgent, though we seemed little conscious of this. But neither did reform seem so urgent, since U.S. troops were there to win the war, and meanwhile troops and dollars were available to take up any slack. Little thought was given to needs for GVN improvement (a) to reduce the necessary U.S. involvement, or (b) to permit eventual U.S. withdrawal, or (c) actually to defeat the Viet Cong, or (d) (in fact) to make any progress whatever beyond the military stalemate achieved by the spring of 1966.

We were, in effect, content with the reliable stalemate achieved by U.S. forces and the hopes of "victory" this engendered. So the old "risks" of U.S. pressure were still cited as an excuse for inaction, mainly to avoid taking what were by now rather small risks of embarrassment: with no one, apparently, noticing the change in the underlying situation. (E.g., almost no one seemed to connect the lack of ARVN coup attempts with the arrival of U.S. combat units; we continued to worry about as much as before about coups, if we pushed reform on the GVN.) Ironically, another factor in our reluctance to use leverage in 1965-1968 was that we applied "lessons" about the risks and low utility of this that we had learned in 1964: before the arrival of U.S. troops, which in fact, unnoticed, transformed the context of potential leverage.

In short, at least some U.S. officials had learned lessons in 1961-1965 about what was needed from the GVN, which some of them and many others thought -- mistakenly -- no longer held after 1965. At the same time, most officials had also learned lessons about what was not possible to achieve in our relations with the GVN that they thought -- also mistakenly -- did still apply after 1965.

For example, real pressure to improve the ARVN Divisions around Saigon, after 1966, in reality risked almost nothing (save personal rapport between Westmoreland and the JGS and Directorate), even if the Divisions had become inactive: i.e., "formally" inactive. (This was perhaps not true if they had gone into revolt, as did the 1st Division during the Struggle Movement of 1966, especially in connection with a popular protest; yet even this would not have posed fatal

military risks vis-a-vis the Viet Cong.) Thus, the arrival of Edward G. Lansdale in August 1965 with his hope, in part, to encourage reform and broadening of the GVN, came at a time when the U.S. Government probably could no longer be brought to see the true importance of such change. It came after the arrival of U.S. combat units, which, by making continuation of the war possible and a "good" outcome of high importance to the United States, made, in Lansdale's eyes, GVN transformation in character and relations to its public both possible (in terms of time, at least) and essential, yet, in the eyes of others, made this seem no longer critical.

We had reverted to the goal of creating a "Communist-free environment" for the (unreformed) GVN: now to be achieved by U.S. effort, instead of by repressive GVN operations as under Diem. For the commitment of U.S. troops "cast a spell" on U.S. decision-makers, who wanted and came to feel that their presence was adequate, without GVN improvement, not only to win a stalemate and buy time, but to win victory at acceptable cost.

In truth, I believe, the troops were inadequate by themselves to win victory even at unacceptable costs: which were soon attained. They could not do that with the GVN as it was, or is, or, realistically, ever shall be; nor could they, without change in the GVN, even achieve a compromise peace settlement much improved over defeat, to which a greatly changed GVN might contribute. (In frankness, 1965 was pretty late to achieve even this, whatever Edward G. Lansdale might have helped accomplish. December 1963 -- forestalling the Khanh coup of January 1964 -- was perhaps the last "promising" time for us to arrive, hoping for a politically effective GVN to evolve from the provisional Minh regime.) But even in 1965, we could have aimed, in my opinion, with a better political strategy, at doing better than we did and with a much smaller U.S. troop presence, and at exiting more gracefully and with better prospects.

What appeared to be an occasional concern on our part for politics and political development was distorted by the fact that our sense, often, of our interests led only to a desire for a GVN political facade. Thus

we wanted, in 1964-1965, an appearance of unity, just enough to legitimize our bombing and troops as having been requested by a functioning GVN. (So long as there appeared to be a GVN, we were little concerned whether it even did ask for our aid.) We cared little, then, whether the posts were filled by Minh, Khanh, Oanh, Huong, Quat, or Ky. In 1966-1967, our main concern was to legitimate the GVN -- preferably in continued military hands -- in the eyes of the U.S. public and foreigners; an appearance of free, representative procedures was what was most needed, in the elections of those years. ("Make it as honest as possible ... so long as you win," as one visitor, now a very high official, laughingly put it to Lansdale before the 1966 election for the Constituent Assembly. Likewise, at the same time, MACV wanted a facade of ARVN performance, unity and cooperation.)

We scarcely noticed, let alone sought, the valuable instrumental impact that even these minimal, facade-building moves had on another of our real problems: the avoidance or dampening of violent challenge by non-Communist groups (which, as we quickly forgot, had been, in 1966, directed at, and had been critical in achieving, promises of a Constitution and elections). On this, we lucked out.

Where we consciously wanted real change in GVN performance, not merely an appearance of change, was in the countryside, in "pacification." (Even this was deprecated in 1966 by Westmoreland, who hoped that the "big-unit war" and the pressures on the DRV would also decide the guerrilla war.) But without real change in the GVN at national level (and consequently, at province and district), the operations of the existing GVN from province down to hamlet were largely likewise a mere facade. Nor was this to be changed by any amount of U.S. presence, pressure or persuasion, at any level, that was not effective in changing the GVN at the national level. Hence, the security situation in the countryside -- the strength and operations and influence of the Viet Cong apparatus, guerrillas and local forces -- was not to be changed at all save by U.S. local occupation: and not permanently even by that.

In short, to "buy time," with U.S. troops, for the GVN to achieve political and military reform was very like "buying time" with U.S. money and materiel in 1950-54, time in which the French could grant complete independence. Neither ally had any intention of using the time bought in the ways we thought essential, or even believed it could so use it, in terms of its own domestic politics; while the U.S. aid, in each case, actually removed most pressure from it to do so.

Thus, a conception of the war emphasizing the key role of political change -- though dominant in estimates and policy discussions of 1950-54, and 1954-61 (less since then, though sporadically present as an individual's view and, from start to present, in public expositions of our views) has never been reflected in our actual joint alliance policy, as implemented. A recurrent cause, discussed above, has been lack of leverage, at the top, to compel political change in a reluctant ally.

But then, the U.S. policy-making system has always been ambivalent (and this seems to have been true even for individual policy-makers) as to why political change -- e.g., a grant of independence, or a broadened and less authoritarian government -- was necessary or urgent. There has always been uncertainty, and some difference of opinion, whether such change was needed (a) for more effective struggle with the communists within Vietnam, or whether (b) it was primarily important to satisfy U.S. domestic opinion that we were supporting a "worthy" government and that our help had truly been sought by the Vietnamese. It is the latter, in fact, that seems most often to be mentioned in cables from Washington (though perhaps in part, because it is a point on which both those who thought the political measures essential to the successful prosecution of the war within Vietnam, and those who did not, could agree.) Yet this need for strengthening U.S. domestic support for policy, could easily be argued to be inadequate to justify pressure on the GVN in face of risks, or even to justify high priority in persuasive effort compared to urgent military needs; and it led to an emphasis on achieving the appearance of change, though we did not always get even that.

Yet another factor reducing our bargaining power with our ally, especially with the GVN (though having its parallel with the French) was a vicious circle in the relationship. As GVN failings (and communist pressures!) progressively reduced the prospects of success, and hence raised domestic doubts in the U.S. about the wisdom of continuing, fears rose in the GVN of our withdrawal, lowering morale and efficiency and aggressiveness still further; whereupon we felt, recurrently, that the only positive impetus we could bring to bear was to reassure the GVN, by abandoning pressures on it and making new commitments to it: thereby foregoing GVN reform of its failings.

An outstanding -- perhaps critical -- example of this was our abandonment of a policy of pressure on Diem for political change (including a reduced role for his brother Nhu) in the Fall of 1960, soon after the abortive coup attempt by General Thi (in which Diem suspected our complicity). Despite an opening provided by Diem's promises of reform to the coup forces, we replaced both our policy and our Ambassador by new ones devoted to reassurance.

We did not at any time (before, perhaps, March 31, 1968), harness GVN doubts of our continued support to our purposes, by using them as the essential basis of leverage: i.e., by conveying credibly that the probability or timing or scale of our withdrawal would be influenced by GVN behavior. We seemed to view reform and improvement as either inessential or infeasible: and attempts to use leverage as too destructive of (more promising?) efforts of persuasion and encouragement. This seemed especially to be our view in crises, where the vicious circle above was generally at work. Although conditions of crisis potentially maximized our leverage -- perhaps the only hope of credibility and effectiveness was at such times -- we regularly, in crises, rejected leverage for reassurance. The one exception was in the Fall of '63, when we rejected the proposal of using leverage on Diem in favor of a policy designed to replace him. But even then, subsequently, no use was made for purposes of influence in late 1963 or 1964 of our apparent willingness to support coups.

Almost never did we undertake "leverage planning," or take

measures to improve our leverage. Rather, we thought hard, again and again, about measures to reassure unconditionally, or to inspire gratitude. In effect, we responded to GVN leverage on us (provided by their implicit "threats" to collapse, to slow down, to negotiate with the NLF, to refuse compliance to our plans or deployments, to lose faith in our reliability or in the success of our efforts). On the occasions that we suggested GVN moves as "desirable" precursors or accompaniments to our "gifts," we quickly dropped such conditions, or went ahead anyway. This pattern was not hidden to the Vietnamese. (Nor had it been to the French).

Influence, of course, does not depend entirely on high-level or "strategic" leverage -- upon which this paper has focussed -- nor does it depend, at any level, entirely upon bargaining power. But skills, personality factors, staff interactions and shared interests and sympathies, to note some other factors of influence, do not seem to have changed the result, or compensated significantly for fundamental weakness in our bargaining position and strategy. Vietnamese influence upon the U.S. could be said to have been highly effective -- an example of the "power of weakness" over a strong but dependent ally -- where U.S. influence on the Vietnamese has been almost an unrelieved failure. Indeed, that rule -- despite a fantastic disproportion of resources in both cases -- seems to have applied not only to our Vietnamese allies but to our Vietnamese opponents, in South and North. But that is another story.