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Civilians Taking Over U.S. Task in Vietnam

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SAIGON, South Vietnam Feb. 8—Young diplomats and paunchy middle-aged airplane mechanics are quietly replacing the professional soldiers who have been in the forefront of the United States establishment in South Vietnam for 10 years. As the soldiers withdraw, in accordance with the Paris peace agreement, a major reorganization of the official American community is under way, with the dominant role going to civilians.

Estimates of the number of civilian technicians now being signed up by the United States to work in South Vietnam range from 5,000 to 10,000. According to informed officials, the order from Washington is to keep the force as small as possible.

Most on Pentagon Contracts

Most of the civilians are being hired on Defense Department contracts, but some perhaps 1,000 or so, are going to work for the State Department and the United States Agency for International Development.

One of the largest companies working on contract to the agency for International Development is Air America, a private airline that is said to have been started by the Central Intelligence Agency and which also does work for the United States Government in Laos. The airline is expected to enlarge its operations in South Vietnam as the last American military planes leave. Some officials say it may be given the job of transporting teams of the Internal Commission of Control and Supervision, which is to monitor the ceasefire.

When reconstruction gets under way, one of the biggest projects, officials say, will be repairing South Vietnam's road network and the 160 "critical" bridges that have been destroyed or heavily damaged during the North Vietnamese offensive last spring. The officials say that some of the contracts for this work may go to American construction companies. But they say that this would probably add only a few hundred men to the American civilian population here.

Vietnamese to Be Trained

The Defense Department turned to the civilians, informed officials say, primarily as a stopgap measure to gain time for the South Vietnamese to acquire technical skills.

The civilians are doing such jobs as operating computers and complex communications equipment and assembling and repairing airplanes and their delicately balanced accessories.

"You can't expect the Vietnamese to learn skills like these overnight," an American military officer said. "But they'll get there eventually, and then the civilians will go home too."

Senior American military men and diplomats will not talk about the civilian technicians and officials. But privately they insist that the United States sees their employment as a short-term venture.

"The idea that we're trying to replace the military with civilians is completely wrong," an official said. "There is no secret desire for the United States to maintain a military or quasi-military role in South Vietnam. This is just a job-oriented structure, and when the job is finished the civilians will be phased out."

The most visible sign of the transition has been the appearance throughout the country of men in gray twill uniforms and sport shirts who work with the South Vietnamese armed forces.

But perhaps even more significant are the structural changes, which will leave the United States Embassy in the pre-eminent position in South Vietnam after its having been overshadowed for years by the military.

With the dissolution of the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, or MACV, the American high command for the war, only about 50 servicemen will remain here, and they will be moved to an office in the embassy. The highest-ranking officer will be Maj. Gen. John E. Murray, who will be known as the defense attaché.

One of General Murray's main responsibilities will be to oversee the work of most of the civilian technicians. He will also head a unit similar to the

military equipment delivery team that the United States has in Cambodia, which will be charged with resupplying the South Vietnamese armed forces on the item basis spelled out in the peace agreement.

Some officers under General Murray will also be engaged in gathering and analyzing military intelligence.

CORDS Being Abolished

In another significant change, the quasi-military agency called CORDS, for Civil Operations and Rural Development Support, which has been in charge of the pacification program, is being abolished. Its director, George Jacobson, who has been a deputy to the head of the Military Assistance Command, is to become a special assistant to Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker and will move into a new office in the embassy.

Mr. Jacobson will have about 300 men, mainly United States employes, working for him throughout the country, compared with the roughly 1,300 soldiers and civilians who were in CORDS at the beginning of this month.

The four regional headquarters of CORDS are being replaced with consulates. The United States already has a consulate in Da Nang, and it is planning to establish others in Nha Vrang on the central coast, Bien Hoa, north of Saigon, and Can Tho, in the Mekong delta.

The consulates will help meet the needs of American civilians in their areas. They will also serve as bases of operation for continued American aid efforts and some intelligence activity.

Diplomats to Oversee Truce

The United States is sending 40 to 50 junior Foreign Service officers into the countryside to report on whether the ceasefire is being observed, and the consulates will serve as field headquarters for them.

Although the South Vietnamese Government has not yet formally approved the United States request to establish the new consulates, the consuls general have been selected and have already started work.

Informed officials identified the four consuls general as Frederick Z. Brown, James B. Engle, Robert L. Walkinshaw and Thomas J. Barnes. All are senior Foreign Service officers with previous service in Vietnam.

Mr. Brown is consul in Da Nang and Mr. Walkinshaw is in charge of the CORDS headquarters in Bien Hoa. The others returned to Vietnam a few days ago—Mr. Engle from an assignment in Washington and Mr. Barnes from the

United States Embassy in Rabat, Morocco.

United States officials say they are hopeful that American economic aid to South Vietnam will continue at the present level of about \$500-million a year, even though there will be far fewer Americans in the country to carry out the programs.

Aid Channeled by Saigon

These officials say the bulk of the American aid has always flowed into Saigon and then gone out to the countryside through Vietnamese channels. They say there will be no changes in the size or the functions of the American staff in Saigon, which has been advising the Government on economic programs and policy.

The focus of American aid during the postwar period, the officials say, will be on reconstruction and the resettlement and rehabilitation of South Vietnam's more than one million refugees.

CORDS grew to its maximum size in the summer of 1970 with more than 8,000 Americans. Only about 1,200 were civilians.

There were CORDS teams in all of the country's 44 provinces, which are roughly equivalent to counties in the United States, and in about 250 of the 274 districts, which are about equivalent to townships. They worked on programs in public health, land reform and farm production, but well over half of the effort was in military or paramilitary activities, such as training and advising militiamen, armed rural development workers, police and the assassination squads of the Phoenix program, whose targets were key Vietcong leaders.

All Speak Vietnamese

The newly arriving technicians are supplanting another force of civilians that was brought in to facilitate the withdrawal of American troops. These civilians, who reached a peak strength of 10,000 in 1970, handled baggage and moved cargo, maintained helicopters and duplicating machines and ran mess halls, garbage dumps and laundries.

All of the young diplomats who will monitor the ceasefire speak Vietnamese and have served previously in

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Vietnam. Wherever possible they are being sent to areas with which they are familiar.

They have been directed to look into the political as well as military aspects of the cease-fire, giving the United States a line of information independent from the supervisory commission.

"We want to see that the cease-fire works," an American official said. "If there are violations we want to know about them. And we know the best way to find out what's happening is to send out people with experience."

Similar to C.I.A. Activity

Few of the delegates to the supervisory commission have been in Vietnam before and only a handful speak Vietnamese.

Some of the information that the Foreign Service officers will be gathering — such as power relationships in villages and hamlets, relationships between the people and the Saigon Government and the Vietcong — will be similar to data that the Central Intelligence Agency routinely collects in Vietnam.

The diplomats, in general, dislike comparisons that link them with intelligence agents.

One slightly ruffled Foreign Service officer emphasized that his colleagues were meant to serve as an "independent

check" on the cease-fire. He said that they would certainly not be doing anything "operational" in the field of intelligence adding, "They're not going to be running any paid intelligence nets or anything like that."