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U.S. to Keep Thousands In Vietnam

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SAIGON, Feb. 8—The United States is shaping a new presence in South Vietnam that assures a continuing deep involvement in this country's affairs.

In a matter of days, the last of the troops that once numbered over half a million will be gone, but thousands of Americans are remaining behind in official roles or to advise and support the Saigon government and its armed forces in technical matters.

While the size of even this non-military presence is down substantially from what it was at its peak, the U.S. Mission to South Vietnam will still be the largest in the world.

Moreover, some of the changes under way are a good deal less sweeping than might have been expected. A major feature of the revamped American structure, for example, is a new "director" within the U.S. embassy. It closely resembles in personnel and purpose the pacification programs known in the jargon of a few years ago as WHAM—winning hearts and mind.

Despite a shift in emphasis to postwar reconstruction, the United States is retaining a sizable commitment to keeping up the standard of Saigon's armies.

The once massive U.S. military establishment here is being reduced to an attaché's office of fewer than 100 servicemen, but for the foreseeable future there will be between 5,000 and 6,000 civilians on contracts paid for by the Defense Department, according to the latest estimate.

These contract employees, most of whom have been here for some time, will be performing what informed sources described as "logistical, supply and training functions" for the South Vietnamese, intended primarily to assist in the maintenance of sophisticated U.S.

supplied aircraft and equipment.

U.S. officials say that the funding of civilian technicians to work with South Vietnam's armed forces does not violate the provisions in the cease-fire agreement prohibiting "military advisers . . . including technical military personnel." The technicians will not be supporting combat activities in any way, the officials contend.

The contractors will be under the direction of the attaché's office, which, at least initially, is scheduled to take over the spacious "Pentagon East" headquarters of the dismantled U.S. command. The ranking officer, whose appointment was announced by the State Department, is Maj. Gen. John E. Murray.

Murray is a logistics expert, but his staff will range far beyond military supply problems in their work. Military sources said that about half the attaches will be watching—mainly from Saigon—the activities of Communist forces throughout the country and serving as liaison with the International Commission for Control and Supervision.

The cease-fire and the departure of U.S. forces has also meant a reorganization of the U.S. embassy, substantially increasing its responsibilities.

Through a network of four consulates—three of them newly established—and the "Resettlement and Reconstruction Directorate," the embassy will have hundreds of people in the field monitoring political developments and supervising American-financed efforts to get South Vietnam back on its feet.

The consulates, located in Danang, Nhatrang, Bienhoa and Cantho, are to be headed by high-ranking U.S. Foreign Service officers and the political reporting will be done by 40 Vietnamese-speaking FSOs just transferred back to South Vietnam from posts around the world.

The FSOs, some of whom were less than happy about being ordered on short notice to leave comfortable positions and their families

for the hardships and uncertainty they face here, will be scattered around the country for tours lasting up to six months. Whether they are extended or replaced depends, officials said, on how the situation in South Vietnam develops.

Significant Innovations

The most significant innovation at the embassy, at least in numerical terms is the "R and R" directorate. The unit will have about 250 staff members drawn primarily from the former pacification program, including a number of retired military men who have been around South Vietnam for years.

Virtually all of the senior civilians in CORDS (Civil Operations and Rural Development Support), the acronym for the pacification effort under the U.S. Military Assistance Command, are being kept on.

George D. Jacobson, a retired colonel who has been the operational head of CORDS for almost two years, has been named a special assistant to Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker.

The structure of the R and R directorate will be very similar to the civilian side of the old pacification program. The scale will be very different, however, with teams of six to eight persons covering an average of two provinces instead of the teams of 200 military and civilian personnel assigned to the larger provinces in 1969-70.

For some of the Americans involved the end of the war will not even mean a change of scenery. Albert I. (Buck) Kotzebue, for instance, a former army officer who has been the senior American adviser in the Mekong Delta province of Kienhoa for more than four years, will be staying there indefinitely.

Other officials are simply being transferred to different locations. In a typical case, John Virgil Swango, another retired lieutenant colonel and one time Peoria, Ill., bar owner, is leaving difficult Binh Dinh province to become a ranking aide in the delta.

Many of the province teams will be living in the same compounds used by CORDS. Ground transportation will be supplemented

Air America, the private CIA airline that has long served pacification and intelligence operation in South Vietnam and Laos.

Private Criticism

The decision to set-up a unit within the embassy so closely patterned on the apparatus of the war years has been privately criticized by some U.S. officials. They argue that the retired militarymen, in particular, identify themselves with policies of the past and are likely to miss the significance of political accommodations and adjustments that doubtless lie ahead for the Vietnamese.

The other view is that experienced people, whatever their background, should be

utilized in the difficult transition period between war and peace. The task of the Resettlement and Reconstruction Directorate, according to Jacobson, will be "to assist GVN (Government of Vietnam) officials at the lower levels in the non-military programs of the 1972-75 'community defense and local development plan.'"

This basically means continuing the existing projects in agriculture, public health, land reform and community development as well as refugee relief. The level of financial assistance is still to be determined by Congress. Planning, however, is based on the expectation of a major and costly reconstruction effort.

One important change in the present set-up, in keeping with the requirements of the Paris cease-fire agreement, is that all civilian public safety advisers who worked with the South Vietnamese police have been withdrawn. (It has been quietly decided, however, to leave a handful of the police experts in Saigon, U.S. sources said.)

In the revised mission structure, the province teams will report to the consuls general in the four regions who will then report to Deputy Ambassador Charles Whitehouse and so on through the State Department's chain of command. But the teams will also be working closely with the Agency for International Development headquarters in Saigon.

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The number of U.S. AID officials in South Vietnam is currently about 900, including those assigned to the R and R Directorate. Although only a third of what it once was, the AID mission there is still three or four times larger than other big American missions around the globe.

New Officer Added

Besides the addition of the consulate and the directorate, the embassy has added two new offices within the political section. One will coordinate the flow of reports coming in from the field and the other will serve as liaison with the ICCS.

To serve the ICCS, the State Department has dispatched officers from its embassies in the four member countries: Canada, Hungary, Poland and Indonesia.

The U.S. diplomat from Warsaw, for example, is a fluent Polish speaker and can keep tabs on the mood of the 283-man Polish contingent. The Hungarian specialist, it is said, is arranging for delivery of Budapest newspapers.

The arrival of the FSOs — they number about 50 in all — has enlivened the Saigon embassy, at least temporarily, giving it something of the flavor of a class reunion, as old friends meet before being sent onwards to the hinterlands.

As for the other principal American agencies — the United States Information Service and the Central Intelligence Agency — they will go on about as before. USIS was converted last year from the mammoth press and propaganda enterprise it was at the height of the war to a more conventional post. The CIA has also withdrawn some of its field staff and analysts in the past two years and has apparently stabilized, officials said.

(The mission leadership is likely to change soon. Bissworth Bunker, who has served in the demanding ambassadorial job for almost six years, is nearing 80 and is expected to leave very soon. The State Department has proposed Graham Martin to replace him. Martin is a former ambassador to Thailand and has just

completed a tour as U.S. envoy in . . .)

Probably the most controversial aspect of the American presence in South Vietnam in the coming months are the Defense Department-funded contractors. The specter has been raised by war critics of a semi-covert array of mercenaries picking up where the regular army left off.

The reality, at this stage, seems to fall short of the dangers portrayed, although it is undeniable that South Vietnam's military readiness will depend to a large extent on the ability of U.S. technicians to keep the equipment running.

In the first place, U.S. officials directly concerned with the contracts insist that the number of 5,000 to 6,000 civilians will be gradually reduced as the Vietnamese become more proficient in servicing themselves.

Sensitive Subject

In an interview last month, Wilfred J. Curley, the civilian Defense Department official here in charge of defense-awarded contracts, said the number would go down steadily. He said that reports of an influx of several thousand advisers and technicians, as much as doubling the present number, were incorrect. "There are absolutely no indications of that happening," he said.

Efforts to interview Curley a second time have been unsuccessful because Pentagon officials are apparently worried about the sensitive nature of the subject.

One measure of the situation, however, is that contractors themselves are not talking of any great windfall after the final departure of

U.S. forces. Some technicians say their salaries have been cut and contracts suddenly terminated.

But it is an indisputable fact that for the foreseeable future there will be Americans in and around every major South Vietnamese military installation work-

ing on the helicopters, aircraft and complex communications systems given the South Vietnamese by the United States.

In other areas of South Vietnamese life as well, Americans will go on watching and prodding the Vietnamese.