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Strategy Change in Viet Nam

Belief Growing That Large-Scale U.S. Effort May Succeed Soon

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THE OUTLINES of a new strategy in Viet Nam are emerging as the influx of massive American military strength begins to take effect.

In its simplest terms, the new strategy calls for the use of large amounts of American men and guns to win a military victory in the south.

Some spectacular successes have changed the official atmosphere from the pessimism of six months ago, when the American effort faced imminent military defeat, to a growing conviction that the back of the insurgency can be broken in the foreseeable future, possibly within months.

Even the failures have helped promote the emerging strategy. The lesson many planners drew this week, when 2000 Viet Cong slipped out of a trap sprung by combined American and South Viet Namese forces, was: Secrecy is better kept when the Americans go it alone.

THE SUCCESSES have strengthened the position of the so-called war hawks—those who never had much use for "special warfare" and counterinsurgency techniques, who wanted to bomb North Viet Nam or even China years ago, who have regretted President Lyndon B. Johnson's offers to negotiate, and who believe that peace talks now would lead to a neutralist South Viet Nam instead of the anti-Communist bastion they see as a possibility.

The "relatively benign policy of counterinsurgency" must be put aside for the time being, in the words of a policy paper being circulated at high levels in the Administration.

As reliance on armed force increases, less is heard about the winning of the hearts and minds of the population.

Officials no longer are reluctant to talk about American use of napalm, tear gas and crop-destroying aerial sprays. Six months ago, if they were discussed at all it was to emphasize how little they were being used.

Despite efforts to avoid injuring civilians in the fight against the Viet Cong, women and children and old men are inevitably among the victims of a war fought increasingly with heavy bombs and artillery.

A new defense of this strategy is being heard in Washington. Critics are being assured that surveys of civilian populations subjected to air attacks show that they blame the war in general for their suffering rather than the particular nation that is doing the bombing.

ONE STUDENT of civilian behavior, arguing in support of the enlarged war in Viet Nam, contends that the rape of a single Viet Namese woman by an American soldier causes far more resentment against the United States than does the destruction of an entire village.

Less is heard, too, about a negotiated settlement. When the outlook was black, the Administration was nagging potential go-betweens in Communist and neutralist countries to try to persuade North Viet Nam to come to the conference table.

Now that the military situation appears brighter, officials are emphasizing that negotiation with the Communists is not the only likely solution.

Officials pointed out this week that the problem could also be solved by an unannounced slowing down of North Viet Namese assistance and Viet Cong activity in the south.

The outcome thus need not follow the pattern of the Indochina war or the Algerian revolution, with their formal peace talks between the insurgents and the French. Instead, it could follow the examples of Greece and the Philippines after World War II, when both nations successfully resisted Communist-led insurgencies.

IN GREECE, the officials pointed out, the Communists simply were worn down and eventually retreated into Bulgaria. The implication was that the Communist-led forces in South Viet Nam might be worn down eventually and caused to retreat into North Viet Nam.

President Johnson has by no means bought the entire hard line. He has not accepted the formula attributed to the new director of the Central Intelligence Agency, William F. Raborn Jr.—"a Rotterdam policy in the north and a Dominican policy in the south." Raborn is said to have explained that this meant saturation bombing of Hanoi, and sending into South Viet Nam five times as

Bombers attacking the north have kept clear of the Hanoi area, where there would be a chance of direct military confrontation with the Soviet Union. Russian-built missiles, which are concentrated around the North Viet Namese capital, have shot down five American planes in the last four months.

The American troop build-up has reached 145,000 and is expected to reach 200,000 eventually. Some military leaders speak of a 1,000,000-man American force, but others scoff at that figure. American troops in the Korean war numbered about 250,000.

A measure of the build-up is the weekly casualty figure. Fifty-eight Americans were killed in action in Viet Nam last week. Total American casualties rose to 806 hostile deaths, 309 nonhostile deaths, 4259 wounded in action, 76 missing in action, and 21 detained by the enemy.

Strategists generally avoid the term victory, although in recent weeks that is clearly what some of them have had in mind.

THEY BASE their present optimism on the apparent ability of the increased manpower and fire-power to defeat the Viet Cong any time the Reds stand still for a fight in regimental or division strength. The war had been going in the direction of big-unit engagements, and the South Viet Namese army was in serious trouble until bolstered by American combat troops.

The immediate task, therefore, is to pound and kill and harry the Viet Cong's main force until it gives up or, more likely, breaks up into small guerrilla bands to continue the fighting without affording a good target.

Once the Viet Cong have been forced to return to guerrilla warfare, it is thought here, the insurgency will be close to defeat. The shift will mean breaking up elaborate supply lines for weapons and supplies, going back to using homemade or captured American arms, and, worst of all, admitting to the Viet Cong rank-and-file that there will not be a quick victory after all.

The strategy paper mentioned earlier says that there are three possible outcomes from the American point of view—defeat,

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a stalemate, or victory. It says that a stalemate would be the hardest to achieve. The implication is that victory should be the goal.

One policy maker who holds that view makes the further point that victory is possible once the United States has forced the Viet Cong to return to guerrilla warfare.

HE REASONS that guerrilla wars invariably are won or lost, that they never end in a draw. A cease-fire would mean that the Viet Cong would promptly lose all the gray areas, the territory where it can operate but cannot make a permanent stand. The reason, he says, is that the Viet Nameese army would use a cease-fire to clean out any guerrillas remaining in such areas.

Those who see the new strategy in these terms contend that progress cannot be measured merely in enemy casualties. They call an operation a success even if it results in few Viet Cong bodies, because the objective is not so much to kill the enemy as to harass him and prove to him that his war is unprofitable.

They insist also that the bombing of North Viet Nam is hurting the Hanoi regime seriously and must be continued with no letup.

This analysis rests on some broad assumptions, which may or may not stand up.

IT ASSUMES that the Viet

Cong lack the resiliency to return to guerrilla warfare and go on effectively with the kind of fighting that took the British 10 years to suppress in Malaya.

It assumes also that American power—planes crisscrossing the country and bombs pounding guerrilla hiding places—can make a country almost as big as Missouri an impossible place to operate.

On the political side, it assumes that the government of Gen. Nguyen Cao Ky, the chief of the Viet Nameese air force, represents a new breed of leaders, able at last to inspire the people with a revolutionary spirit that will unify them in the fight.

Finally, this analysis assumes that favorable results will come very soon. President Johnson would find it embarrassing to go to the country seeking re-election in 1968 with a stalemated war still on his hands, and the ever-larger conflict could well be an issue in the congressional elections next year.

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