A History of the Hamlet Evaluation System (HES)

On the 24th of October, 1966, Robert S. McNamara, then Secretary of Defense, requested that the CIA and other Washington groups devise a procedure and technique for evaluating progress in the pacification aspects of the war in South Vietnam. Pacification was at that time known as "the other war" -- a term whose lifespan was deservedly brief. In response to Secretary McNamara's request, a task group under the leadership of Mr. George W. Allen of the CIA's Vietnamese Affairs Staff devised a quantitative technique that would permit measurement of pacification and a comparison of the pacification situation over time. As a basis for the new system, a technique previously developed by the U.S. Marines in South Vietnam was used. The five-point system of the USMC was expanded to comprise the eighteen criteria of HES; more emphasis was placed on security, and, in particular, on the effectiveness of Viet Cong (VC) infrastructure and guerrilla forces. A major innovation of HES was the selection of the hamlet as the basis of reporting rather than the village, which had been the datum of field reporting under the USMC system. In many areas of South Vietnam, the villages are of large enough size to permit widely disparate conditions of security to coexist -- thus any rating of the village's status would of necessity be somewhat ambiguous.

One of the principal features of HES was the attempt to minimize subjective judgements on the part of evaluators. It was, in fact, the wide disparity in personal judgements as to our progress or lack of it that led to the need for Secretary McNamara's request. The HES evaluation criteria consisted of five categories of observable phenomena, e.g., "no overt propaganda, but terrorism or sabotage during past month." These criteria are arranged on a work sheet so that after entering some basic data on the hamlet (name, location, population, etc.) the evaluator simply examines the statements associated with each criteria until he finds the one which best fits his assessment of the hamlet. Each of these statements is keyed to a letter grade. If the above example had best fit the hamlet, for instance, the hamlet would have received a grade of "D" in the criterion of VC subversive and political activities affecting the hamlet.

Prior to the development of HES, aggregate data on the status of pacification in South Vietnam came solely from the Government of South Vietnam (GVN). Lacking the American penchant, or capability, for the accurate collection and processing of quantitative data, at that time the GVN reports lacked precision -- or even consistency -- to a degree that rendered them nearly useless. In view of this, it was decided that the new HES technique would be controlled entirely by U. S. forces. The key element in the system was the sub-sector (district) advisor, who actually performed and recorded the evaluation of each hamlet within his area of responsibility. While he sought the judgements of other representatives at district level, including GVN civilian and military officers, the ultimate responsibility for the accuracy and consistency of the report lay in American hands. Needless to say, such a system was greeted with a distinct lack of enthusiasm by GVN officials, who perhaps feared that either their veracity or their ability to obtain resources from Saigon would be jeopardized by the American data gathering. As time wore on, however, GVN officials noticeably warmed to the HES technique -- first accepting the data as authentic, then using the system as the basis for its central pacification planning, and finally taking over the reporting system virtually in its entirety.

While deliberately simple in concept, the HES posed what for its day were formidable problems in data processing (the revised HES system was to add new meaning to the word complexity, even for data processing experts). The sub-sector advisor, a U. S. military officer, had been selected as the key element in the system because he represented the only U. S. official permanently stationed at district level. Because of this, and because no other organization in Vietnam had the capability, the burden of processing the information on about 12, 000 hamlets per month fell to USMACV. With cooperation of the military, the task force led by Mr. Allen began field tests of HES in late November and early December, 1966. By that time, general agreement had been reached on the format of the HES information sheets -- often called the "grid" -- even though disagreement as to the proper relative weights of security and development aspects persist up to the present time. With the field tests completed, HES made its formal debut in January 1967, and although the data received for the first month was plagued by inconsistencies and omissions, persistent efforts to track down hamlet locations, populations, names and other characteristics produced

a sound data base by March of that year. From that time, HES has produced a consistent data series on pacification in South Vietnam from which reasonably firm conclusions could be drawn concerning progress or regression.

While HES was designed to measure pacification progress, it was not intended that it do so in the same manner as the previous techniques used by the GVN. The Saigon government had used a hybrid system of population/area "control" categories -- Secure, Secure Day Only, and VC. When the HES technique was implemented, however, the data emerging from it was made to fit this general mold. The summary letter grades (the arithmetic average of the eighteen criteria) were grouped so as to form three categories: Secure (A, B, and C hamlets); Contested (D and E hamlets); and VC (VC hamlets only). While this did give some semblance of continuity between the U. S. and GVN systems, they were, in fact, statistically incompatible. More significantly, in the view of many analysts, there were two basic reasons why the "Secure, Contested, VC" categories should not be used. First, HES did not specifically measure "control," either of population or area. Second, from a quantitative standpoint, the control categories tended to mask significant movements in pacification status. In fact, it was statistically possible for HES to measure a decline in pacification status that would appear as progress in the control categories. It is precisely this type of anomaly that produced the contrast between optimistic HES-based press releases and the real events leading up to the Tet (1968) offensive.

The HES reporting system as originally designed, lasted for three years -- from January 1967 through December 1969. In January 1970, a new system was introduced in which the district advisor did not rate the hamlet as such but merely answered an array of questions dealing with the situation in the hamlet. His responses were processed via an exceedingly complex analogue in Saigon to come up with a hamlet rating. While it is possible that the revised HES system achieved its intent of getting the advisor out of the rating business, it is certain that it made the system both far more cumbersome as well as statistically inconsistent with the three years of data that had preceded it.

Concurrent with the revision of HES, the new Administration in Washington had taken an interest in the "control war" and had sponsored the development of a new indicator of control -- the Vietnam Special Studies Group (VSSG) indicator. This indicator, which was based on selected

responses to HES questions, was believed to indicate rural control with somewhat more fidelity than the total HES scores. The truth of the matter is, however, that the comparison in trend between VSSG and HES does not demonstrate any dramatic difference between the two measurement tools.

For about two years, the revised HES system was used principally to evaluate the pacification situation and to monitor the progress of Vietnamization. During this period the HES became more and more the yardstick by which the GVN developed, implemented, and evaluated its pacification plans. Gradually, as part of the Vietnamization process, the GVN took over the HES reporting itself. In December 1972, the HES report was completely Vietnamese in origin, although the U. S. continues to provide data processing support.

In 1972, as negotiations with the Communists progressed, the HES data became more and more useful as the basis of establishing relative control patterns throughout South Vietnam. While there are limitations to the HES system as an indicator of territorial control (as well as limitations to the territorial control situation as the basis for negotiations), the HES data provided the initial point of departure for maps and analyses provided in support to the U. S. negotiators. It is very likely that the HES data will be used to evaluate the impact of the Communist activities subsequent to the ceasefire and will provide a continuing index of the GVN's ability to go it alone.

ANALYTICAL TECHNIQUES DEVELOPED BY THIS OFFICE TO EVALUATE THE PACIFICATION EFFORT

1. The Hamlet Evaluation System (HES) itself was in large part a result of the personal effort and applied expertise of Mr. George W. Allen while he was a member of this staff.

2. Subsequent to the development of the system, a series of analytical techniques were implemented to extract the most information from the system and to "keep it honest":

(a) The Hamlet-weighted data series. This procedure was developed to counter the bias created by refugees fleeing the countryside to more urban (therefore GVN) areas. This data series -- along with other information -- was used in several unpopular briefings in late 1967 to show that the GVN was losing ground despite the USMACV press releases to the contrary.

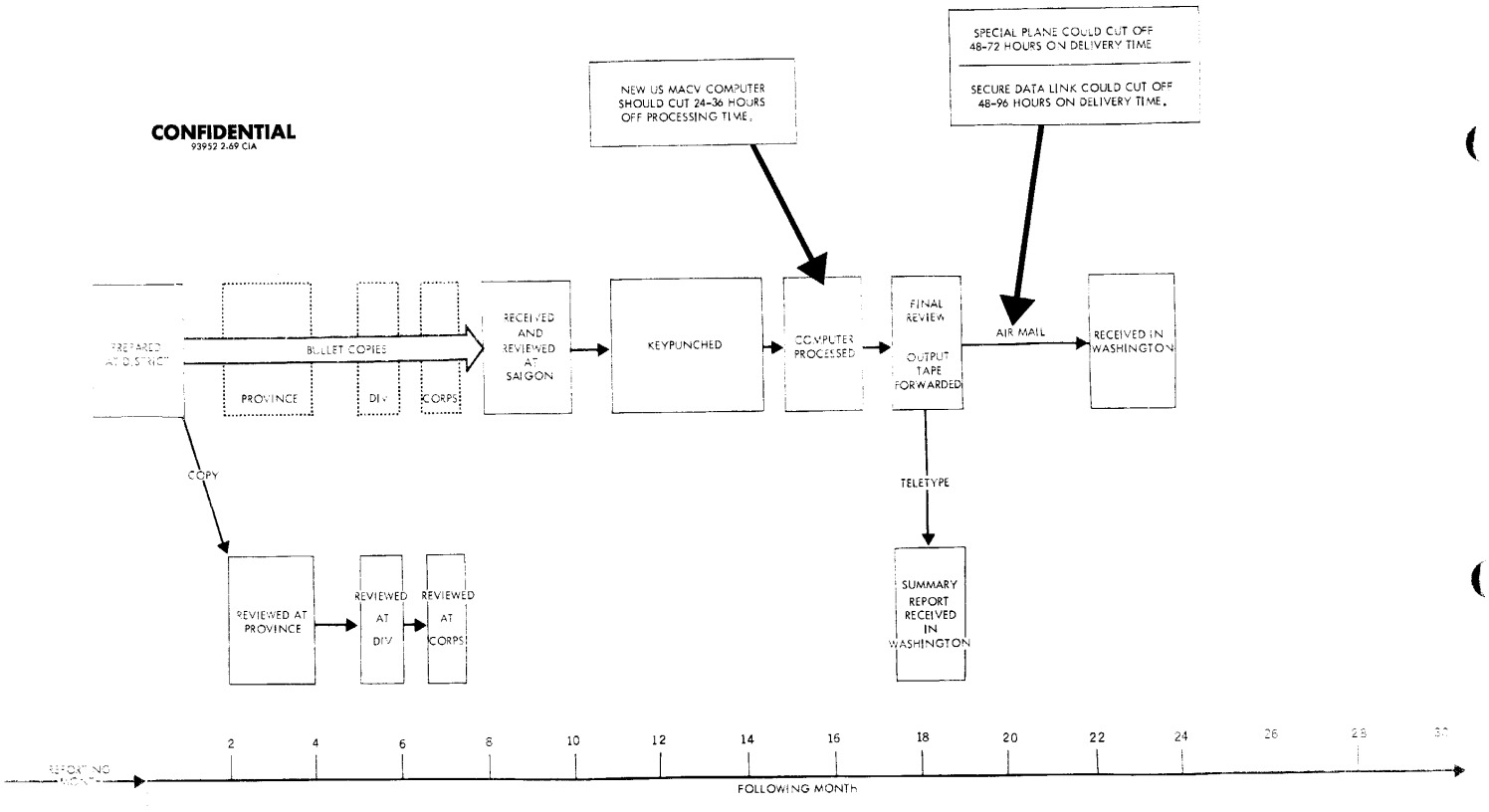
(b) The consistently-rated hamlet series. This data series was created to counter the tendency to ignore hamlets that had fallen on to hard times.

(c) The Contested "C" hamlet series. This series was developed as a compromise device to keep the HES data as accurate as possible under the constraint of persistence in the use of letter categories as direct indicators of control.

(d) The separate indicator series. This series was developed in order to resolve the weighting problem inherent when developmental projects -- such as digging a well -- are lumped into a system along with enemy military activity.

(e) The direct hamlet plot. This type of plot was used to produce maps that showed in great detail the pacification situation throughout South Vietnam.

FLOW OF HAMLET EVALUATION SYSTEM (HES) REPORTS



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