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24 June 1966

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS to

THE HIGHLANDERS OF SOUTH VIETNAM (Attached)

Approximately fifty percent of South Vietnam's territory consists of mountains and forested upland plateaus whose indigenous inhabitants are 700,000-odd nomadic and primitive people who, among themselves, display considerable ethnic and cultural diversity but who all share the common trait of being both ethnically and culturally distinct from the lowland Vietnamese. Until 1954 French colonial policy had enveloped these Highlanders in a protective mantle which effectively limited Vietnamese settlement in their native habitat. This mantle was torn away in 1954 when control of the Highlands passed to the Vietnamese; soon thereafter Vietnamese refugees and settlers began coming into the Highlands in large numbers. In the provinces of Kontum, Pleiku, Phu Bon, Darlac and Quang Duc, where there had been approximately 6,000 Vietnamese in 1953, there were about 150,000 ten years later. This influx of Vietnamese settlers and administrators, who had no knowledge of the Highlanders and showed little to no regard for Highlanders' customs or land rights, exacerbated the historic animosity existing between Highlanders and ethnic Vietnamese. Throughout history the Highlanders had resisted outside domination, including French domination. In 1957, educated Highlanders began organizing resistance to Vietnamese domination of the Highlands, making an open though unsuccessful bid for autonomy a year later. Continued unrequited sentiment for autonomy erupted into armed revolts in 1964 and 1965.

The Vietnamese Government's policy has consistently aimed at the assimilation of the Highlanders into Vietnamese society and consistently opposed the establishment of an autonomous region for them. The Saigon Government's attention, when directed to the Highlands, has primarily concentrated on the problem of Vietnamese settlement. Such attention, however, has been sporadic (partly because of pressing political problems elsewhere). Highland programs designed to encourage ethnic Vietnamese

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settlement and Highlander assimilation have often languished for want of resources, ineffective administration or simple bureaucratic neglect. Vietnamese officials have always been prone to ignore the Highlander and often treated him as a savage without rights. The actions of such officials have often done more to hinder than to advance the policy of assimilation. Little effort has been made to understand the Highlanders and attention has been given to improving their lot only when local conditions -- e.g., incipient or current Highlander "revolts" -- have made it impossible to ignore Highlander needs or aspirations.

The Viet Cong have long been active in Highland areas. Viet Cong propaganda has exploited the ineptness of the Saigon Government and the Communists have long encouraged the Highlanders to seek autonomy from Saigon. In 1961, the Viet Cong launched a drive to control the Highlands which resulted in over 100,000 Highlanders fleeing Viet Cong areas. With considerable assistance and encouragement from the U.S. Government, the Vietnamese Government responded by arming the Highlanders for village defense under the Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) program. As security improved, however, the Vietnamese began disarming the Highlanders, political and economic aspects of the CIDG program became subordinated to more conventional military activities, and programs for improving the lot of the Highlander lost momentum. The Highlanders, not trusting Vietnamese promises which had often been broken, developed a dissident group (FULRO) which has demanded complete autonomy and has gained an increasing acceptance among the Highlanders as the government has failed to implement promised reforms and programs.

The deterioration of security in the Highlands has precluded effective government administration outside of the chief towns which are primarily populated by ethnic Vietnamese. By the spring of 1966 the Communists probably had some form of influence over fifty percent of the Highlanders, while the government influenced about twenty-five percent. The security situation would limit effective implementation of economic programs for the Highlanders even if the government were to initiate such programs. Negotiations with the dissident FULRO organization, though showing some signs of progress, have run hot and cold partly because of internal political stresses in the Saigon Government. The outlook for significant improvement in Vietnamese-Highlander relations in the foreseeable future is not encouraging.

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The existing attitude of Vietnamese administrators makes it doubtful that any broad government program would meet with success, even if the security and political situation were to improve. The government would still be faced with the problem of educating the Vietnamese administrators who are assigned to the Highlands and must implement any program for the Highlanders, and the more basic problem of the general attitude of the Vietnamese, both military and civilian, in daily contact with the Highlanders. The Highlander is looked upon by administrator, soldier, and settler as unworthy of decent treatment. In most instances, the Highlander has not even achieved the position of second-class citizen.

It is possible that the Vietnamese are willing to accept the Highlander as a second-class citizen when the Highlander has earned this privilege, but the Vietnamese see no reason for allocating their resources to a program that will assist the Highlanders in obtaining this position, especially when these resources are needed to raise the living standards of the Vietnamese. The Vietnamese feel the Highlander must gain their respect, but do not feel that they must gain the respect of the Highlander. The Vietnamese will reluctantly provide limited assistance in education, agriculture, medical services and public administration to keep the Highlander from open rebellion, but it is doubtful that a just land title program, protection from exploitation by merchants, or recourse to a legal system keyed to Highlander problems will be forthcoming in the near future. Autonomy is out of the question.

The government in Saigon recognizes the need for improving the lot of the Highlander and winning him to the side of the government. But only after Highlander revolts and in reaction to pressure from the United States Government and the Viet Cong has the Vietnamese Government given serious attention to the problem. The Government of Vietnam has never implemented a program for the Highlanders that it has not later discontinued or allowed to deteriorate from neglect. Much of this is due to the lack of initiative and understanding by local administrators and the lack of direction by the central government. Government programs in areas other than the Highlands met the same fate. It would be unfair to imply that the government had done substantially better in solving its problems in other areas outside the Highlands.

The policy of the Vietnamese Government to assimilate the Highlanders into Vietnamese society has not changed since its formulation in 1955. Follow-up action to develop and carry out programs designed

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to achieve this policy has been extremely spotty. Since 1956 repeated recommendations have been made for the establishment of a special agency charged with formulating and managing programs for the Highlanders, but this has not been accomplished. The former Directorate, now Commission, for Highlander Affairs has not been given either the authority or the influence necessary to undertake management responsibility.

The Highlanders' semi-nomadic life, resistance to cultural change, historic distrust of the Vietnamese, and strong aversion to control has further complicated Vietnamese efforts of assimilation. The protection afforded the Highlander during French colonial days (when the Vietnamese were excluded from the area) posed a severe handicap on the ability of the Vietnamese to undertake the administration of an area they knew little about. With the influx of American personnel into the Highlands who demonstrated a greater sympathy toward the Highlanders than was possible for the Vietnamese, the Highlanders sought the protection of the Americans and gave their loyalty to the Americans instead of the Vietnamese. This in turn caused the Vietnamese, who remembered French protective activities, to distrust American intentions. With some success, the Highlanders also attempted to use Americans as a buffer between themselves and the Vietnamese. They not only sought assistance and advice from Americans in their efforts to gain autonomy, but also attempted to negotiate with the Vietnamese through the Americans. The Highlander believed local American sympathies and programs indicated that the U.S. Government was willing to support Highlander aspirations for autonomy. When they were informed that the U.S. Government would only assist the Highlanders through the Vietnamese Government and would not support their aspirations for autonomy, Highlanders found this hard to believe and were slow to accept it as the truth.

It is not possible to pick out any one cause of the Vietnamese Government's lack of success in the Highlands. The principal factors were deteriorating security, the attitude of the Vietnamese, poor government management, with each aggravating the others. It is possible to speculate that had the Vietnamese had a more sympathetic attitude toward the Highlanders, the Viet Cong would have been less successful, but the Highlanders do not appear to have accepted the Viet Cong any more willingly than the Vietnamese in the lowlands accepted the Viet Cong. It is likely that had there been better administration of Vietnamese programs the Highlanders would have been less inclined to believe the Vietnamese had no interest in them, but this would still not have overcome the Highlanders' resentment and fear of being Vietnamized.

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In the final analysis American supported programs in the Highlands have been directed toward improving the security situation, not toward improving Highlander-Vietnamese relations. (Though the intention in 1961 was to improve relations, improve the welfare of the Highlanders, and improve security.) These programs provided no training of Vietnamese so that they could better understand and administer the Highlanders. The Vietnamese feared the programs would provide a Highlander force that would be hostile to the government.

Attempts to move rapidly ahead with American sponsored programs in the Highlands were frustrated by Vietnamese officials who, for a number of reasons, were not interested or convinced in the merits of the programs. There were also only a limited number of Vietnamese qualified to administer the programs and thus unqualified and poorly motivated officials were assigned in a number of areas. As American frustrations mounted, the Americans assumed an increasing degree of direct control and command. Vietnamese officials became figureheads and lost face in the eyes of the Highlanders. Many Americans observing the attitude of the Vietnamese and the childlike nature of the Highlanders sided with the latter. The Americans had a much better understanding of the Highlanders than did the Vietnamese and were extremely sympathetic to Highlander needs, but at least at the local level, the Americans were not in sympathy with the Vietnamese policy of assimilation (if in fact they were informed of this policy) as it was being carried out. Instead of attempting to understand the Vietnamese position, they ignored it. Much of this was due to lack of effective coordination between U.S. agencies at the national level and lack of adequate direction and guidance by the U.S. agencies to their officers working in the provinces who in turn had to interpret policy and programs. At one point there were four U.S. agencies advising Vietnamese officials at the local and national level on how to deal with the Highlanders. This lack of coordination and direction applied also to the Vietnamese at the national and local level.

In spite of the difficulties and the resulting frustrations temporary success was achieved. It is likely that had the Americans not initiated the programs they did in 1961 that most of the Highlands would have fallen to the Viet Cong in 1962. It is also likely that the American organizational activities among the Highlanders and the training of military groups contributed substantially to the strength of the Highlander autonomy movement.

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A balance was not achieved between crash programs to obtain immediate improvement in the security situation and programs designed to assimilate the Highlanders over the long term. Though the American Government made repeated recommendations on programs of a long-term nature, both the Vietnamese and Americans were preoccupied with problems of the moment. Techniques applied to solving the immediate problems ran counter to the techniques required for solving the long-term problems. The arming of the Highlanders without equal emphasis on political and economic factors strengthened the Highlander as a force but did not initiate the development of political and economic institutions that would provide the Highlander a place in the national society. The movement of Highlanders to resettlement centers and the implementation of the Strategic Hamlet Program were primarily for the purpose of improving security and did not provide adequate long-term assistance in agriculture, education, or administration.

Monday morning quarterbacking is, of course, always easier than identifying problems while deep in the process of developing programs designed to meet an emergency situation. Nor is it easy to predict the longer term effects of urgently needed crash programs when these are first initiated. In looking back at Vietnamese and American efforts in the Highlands, however, there are lessons to be learned regarding future approaches to the problem on the American side:

1. In a minority area, all American officials are inevitably involved, directly or indirectly, with the minority problem. These officials need a complete understanding of policy and objectives which must be partially provided by conversations with superiors in Saigon. Written background material, guidance, and direct supervision of these officials is also necessary. Thus an executive authority at the U.S. Mission level would appear to be required to recommend policy, program, indoctrinate, inform, and monitor, as well as represent the U.S. Mission in conversations and negotiations with host government authorities. Early consideration should be given to the idea of appointing, at the U.S. Mission level, a senior, well informed officer who will devote full time and attention to the Highlander problem.

2. In dealing with the Vietnamese Government, emphasis should be given to special preparation of Vietnamese and Highlanders for government assignment in the Highlands and to encourage the government to indoctrinate its officials on policy as well as monitor and supervise these officials and the programs. It is not expected that historic animosities will change rapidly, but through education of both

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Vietnamese and Highlander better understanding can be achieved. The establishment of a career service for Vietnamese assigned to ethnic minority problems and programs instead of the constant rotation of civil servants would provide better qualified cadre.

3. The Vietnamese policy is to assimilate the Highlander, exercise political and military control in the Highlands, and not grant autonomy to the Highlanders. If the U.S. Government supports the Vietnamese policy, then its actions at the local level should reflect this support. If there is exception to aspects of the policy or the manner in which it is being carried out then these exceptions should be aired with the Vietnamese at an appropriate administrative level and if necessary support of programs or the Vietnamese policy withdrawn. But public airing of differences with the Highlanders should be carefully considered before being approved and undertaken. American personnel should work through Vietnamese officials and keep their direct work with the Highlander to a minimum. The Highlander should see the Vietnamese and not the American as the person who is attempting to help him. This will be extremely difficult, for the Vietnamese first need to be trained and indoctrinated, but they in the end must live with the problem and the effects of action taken.

4. Programs should be expanded as Vietnamese and Highlander administrative, political and economic capacity increase. Even short-term programs should be geared to assist in accomplishing long-term objectives. Though it may be desirable it is not necessary to commence programs for the entire Highlands. Success, carefully evaluated in local programs, should dictate expansion.

5. A thorough understanding of Vietnamese policy and objectives is necessary prior to recommending programs or actions. The Vietnamese attitude toward Highlander land rights, administration of justice, education and agriculture will have a significant effect, and it may be better to initially work within the accepted attitude while assisting the Vietnamese to become better informed rather than attempt to force programs on the Vietnamese. The Vietnamese have become frustrated because assimilation was not accomplished in a short period. The Americans have recognized that assimilation is a long-term objective. The Vietnamese can be brought to recognize this basic difference in approach and experience to date may convince them that assimilation is a long-term objective.

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The Highlander situation in Vietnam neither developed nor will be solved overnight. The recurring political unrest among the Highlanders is primarily due to the pressure of the more advanced Vietnamese culture on the primitive Highlander culture. The Vietnamese are still searching for a solution within their policy of assimilation. The Highlanders will continue to press for autonomy. It would appear from past events that further efforts by the U.S. Government to encourage and assist the Vietnamese Government to constructively assimilate the Highlanders will be both frustrating and for nought. But there are some possible signals of an encouraging nature. The Vietnamese Government, shocked by the strength of FULRO and recognizing the need for Highlander support which cannot be obtained without accepting and acting upon at least several of the Highlanders' demands, has assigned more and more responsibility to Paul Nur, Commissioner for Highlander Affairs. Paul Nur is still lacking the necessary authority. The Vietnamese Government and its officials appear to be awakening to the problem. Whether this is a temporary phenomenon as it has been in the past is a matter of conjecture.

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