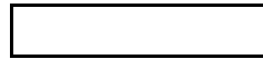


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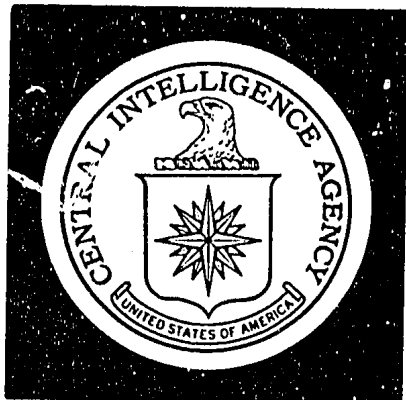
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DIRECTORATE OF  
INTELLIGENCE

# Intelligence Memorandum

SOUTH VIETNAM: NATIONAL COHESION AND VIETNAMIZATION

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20 August 1970  
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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY  
Directorate of Intelligence  
20 August 1970

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

South Vietnam: National Cohesion and Vietnamization

Introduction

Political stresses that have developed over the last year may in the long run significantly affect the ability of South Vietnam to hang together and to continue the war as US forces withdraw.

Since it became an independent state in 1954, South Vietnam has been short on nationalism and long on regionalism, sects, and personal coteries. What little political cohesion exists has been superimposed from above, and today the country is held together by the government and military apparatus, which together provide the guidance and coherence required for the effort against the Communists.

Since mid-1969, bolder opposition agitation, growing economic unrest, and recurring doubts about allied willingness to stay the course against the enemy have been significant problems for the government. The impact of these problems on national stability and cohesion could eventually be magnified as the US presence--so far an important stabilizing factor--is further reduced.

Note: This memorandum was produced solely by CIA. It was prepared by the Office of Current Intelligence and coordinated with the Office of Economic Research, the Office of National Estimates, and the Special Assistant for Vietnamese Affairs. The Directorate for Plans was consulted in the drafting and is in general agreement with its findings.

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The Communists are keenly aware of the chronic inability of the South Vietnamese to cooperate politically, and they hope to exploit some future schism within the South Vietnamese Government to help them take over the country. The government, however, has already weathered a number of serious problems since it took office in 1967, and its record suggests that it will somehow muddle through.

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Fissiparous Tendencies in South Vietnam

1. There is only one political group in South Vietnam that has an organized following in every major region, operates under a central authority with relatively good discipline, and is guided by a common political philosophy: the Communist Party controlled from Hanoi. The Communists are aware of the advantage this gives them, and, though they recognize demonstrated allied tenacity on the battlefield, they still count heavily on their superior dedication and organization to give them the requisite staying power to win the struggle for control of the South.
2. On the non-Communist side, there are no national parties. Only the government apparatus and the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF) operate on a national scale. In a very real sense, the South Vietnamese Army (ARVN) is the most important anti-Communist political force in the country.
3. Most parties are regional. The nationalist (VNQDD) and Revolutionary Dai Viet parties are strong in Military Region I and in some cities. The militant Buddhists are important along the northern coast, the Cao Dai sect in Tay Ninh Province, and the Hoa Hao sect in the delta. Some parties, like the leftist National Progressive Force, are largely the figment of their "leaders'" imaginations.
4. There have been a number of attempts during the last two or three years to amalgamate regional groupings into nationwide political confederations. President Thieu formed the Lien Minh in 1968 and the National Social Democratic Front (NSDF) in 1969. Senator Don initiated a National Salvation Front after Tet 1968. Each was advertised as a broad, national alliance for political mobilization against the Communists, but each soon degenerated into a vehicle to serve the personal ambitions of individual leaders. The history of these alliances--like those of the militant Buddhist leadership, the Vietnamese Confederation of Labor, the regional parties mentioned above, and

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the several attempts at cooperation by opposition leaders--is one of fading interest, schisms, and, before long, virtual collapse.

5. There are exceptions, but few South Vietnamese individuals are attracted to service in a higher cause. Family obligation is strong, but there is little sense of national duty. Few South Vietnamese are willing to subordinate personal advantage to the common good. Mutual trust is rare, and peers seldom work closely together for long. Politicians, administrative officials, and military officers want to get support, but they are willing to give very little in return. These are some of the reasons why the NSDF, for example, began to fall apart as soon as it was put together in 1969: why President Thieu is less inclined than formerly to consult closely with peers such as Prime Minister Khiem; and why the South Vietnamese Army, the Regional and Popular forces, and the National Police did little to coordinate their respective operations against the enemy until forced to do so from above.

#### Unifying Factors

6. An apparatus of almost two million troops and officials has been put together, but the common purpose is essentially negative: to prevent a Communist takeover. Probably the strongest impulse to unite was inadvertently provided by the Tet offensive of 1968, when the Communists became much more widely identified as a common enemy and when officials and troops tackled their missions with a new sense of urgency. On the other hand, as most Communist main-force units withdrew from the battlefields to the border sanctuaries in 1969 and as the enemy's threat to the villages seemed to recede late that year, the anti-Communist motivation lost some of its urgency.

7. Funds, direction, and coherence for this politico-military apparatus are provided through the national leaders in Saigon, whose role is critical to the functioning of the whole anti-Communist effort. Central coordination is essential if the South Vietnamese are to hang together and continue

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the battle against a Communist takeover. In the event of serious erosion of this role at the national level, military commanders and province chiefs would have grave doubts whether non-Communists could win the struggle. Desertions, corruption, and private deals with the enemy are chronic enervating diseases in South Vietnam that probably would destroy what vitality has developed over the years in the government and military apparatus. Although this mechanism now has a momentum of its own and probably would not disintegrate overnight, any piecemeal decay on the government side would be made to order for the Communists, making it easier for them to reach accommodations and to neutralize or capture control of piece after piece of the government apparatus in the villages, at the province level, and in Saigon.

8. The political framework for the vital central authority is now provided largely by the Constitution of 1967, which was established with the help of US inspiration, pressure, and guidance. The Constitution rests mainly on a foundation of US support and ARVN acquiescence, not on the traditional values of South Vietnam. Despite its essentially alien origins and character, however, the constitution is now an important part of the total government structure, which binds the country together and keeps it functioning after a generation of subversion, insurgency, and conventional war.

9. South Vietnam has moved during the last ten years from rule by the Diem family through a succession of military coups and collective rule by a military directorate to a constitutional format providing at least a semblance of representative government. More important, however, the constitution gives a promise of stability, of continuity, and of orderly transition in government. It is likely that most South Vietnamese would think abandonment of the constitution signals a reversion to personal or factional rule and a new era of uncertainty, especially regarding the commitment against the Communists.

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10. Overseas reaction to such a reversion could also be costly for the Saigon government. The Communists would be pleased if the government were to rely heavily on broad police-state controls or suspend the constitution and reimpose military rule. Many captured enemy documents mention the importance of public opposition in the US to the Vietnamese commitment, and the Communists welcome any development that strengthens such sentiment. President Thieu is also aware of the importance of US public opinion and would prefer to handle any crisis without dramatically harsh measures or military rule for the same reasons the Communists would welcome an extreme reaction.

11. US support will remain vital for a long time, and the South Vietnamese Government and army will continue to give US views due weight. Nevertheless, as American military power diminishes in South Vietnam and the South Vietnamese have to rely more and more on themselves, American political influence will probably also ebb. American advisers will probably find more of their advice ignored, sometimes more pointedly than in the past. The recent rise in incidents symptomatic of anti-American feelings may mark the beginning of a general decline in the influence of American views and values. As US forces withdraw, the constitution will increasingly depend on the support of the South Vietnamese armed forces. The stability of the structure will be determined more by South Vietnamese attitudes and values, with less and less reference to the US.

#### Three Types of Stresses

12. In view of the near-compulsion of South Vietnamese groups to split apart and of the probable decline in US influence as a stabilizing factor, national unity and durability will rest in no small measure on how well the country regulates the conflicts within its own body politic. If economic unrest or violent agitation, for example, generate so much heat that they lead to a widespread conviction that it is more important to oust the government immediately than to do it constitutionally, and if the army should share that

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conviction, the present relatively stable system would disappear.

13. There are at least three basic situations that could persuade the South Vietnamese to take such an extreme step. First, if street agitation became so extensive or violent that it seemed clear that the government was losing control, or if the government were gravely ineffectual in coping with any other development, the chances of an army coup would rise sharply.

14. Second, if the government came to be regarded as hopelessly unfair by South Vietnamese standards, as the Diem regime was in its handling of Buddhist grievances in 1963, the army might let the Thieu government fall before the assault of opposition forces.

15. Third, if the military became convinced that the regime was participating in what it regarded as a "sell-out"--for example, by negotiating to give the Communists real power in a coalition government--some army leaders would be strongly tempted to step in and prevent the arrangement. The army might consider that the possible danger of losing US support by resisting the formation of a coalition was less serious than the dangers that would arise in trying to compete politically with Communists within the government.

#### Agitation and Government Effectiveness

16. Last April and May, a crisis in confidence seemed to be developing within the government as protest demonstrations became more and more common. Dissidents began to take courage from their growing numbers, and the government looked anything but effective. Various high officials privately blamed each other, and by early June it appeared that Prime Minister Khiem and the ministers of finance and economy might be made the scapegoats and replaced. The government has so far managed with a carrot-and-stick approach to keep the situation under control without pushing the panic button, but, where it has dared, it is using progressively greater force.

17. The three most active groups of dissidents in recent months have been students, Buddhist monks, and veterans; of these the government has cracked down hardest on the students. The application of harsh measures has been gradual. First the government yielded to some student demands concerning the handling of arrested student leaders. As student street demonstrations developed, the government used force to disperse them. By early summer, however, the government, no longer content merely to disperse the students, broke with precedent to pursue them into what had been the campus sanctuary. In one case, the police invaded a campus meeting room after hearing a report that a speaker was encouraging students to refuse their military obligations. Militant student agitators are still in a minority, and the government can afford to take such measures without fear of antagonizing whole student bodies.

18. The students have become more careful since this crackdown, but the militant leadership has beaten the moderates in a recent election of the Saigon Students Union, and more militancy is to be expected. There have been reports that student leaders from Saigon have visited other cities to lay the groundwork for more widespread antigovernment activity. Tougher police measures against the sons of South Vietnam's budding middle class, the bureaucracy, and military leaders could easily make the government seem insensitive and inept, unless the police behave with great skill and have their full share of luck in the coming months.

19. Although the militant Buddhists are currently divided among themselves over what strategy to pursue, the most activist among them are quietly trying to lay the groundwork for more widespread agitation focused on the peace theme. But they have noted the government's tougher attitude toward dissidents, including Thieu's repeated warnings against agitation that tends to undermine the war effort, and they, like the students, are proceeding more cautiously. Thich Tri Quang's advice to follow the parliamentary path is prevailing for the moment over Thich Thien Minh's more militant counsels. Tri

Quang does not want to lose another confrontation with the government, as the Buddhists did during their Struggle Movement of 1966. Moreover, he seems to have been more deeply impressed by Thich Thien Minh's incarceration in a government jail in early 1969 than Minh was himself. This summer, at least, the more activist militant Buddhists are biding their time, while their more cautious brothers campaign for an opposition slate headed by Vu Van Mau in the Senate election campaign.

20. If the militant Buddhists should ever mount a really serious attack on the government, with its many educated Catholic functionaries and high officials, the result could be a communal dispute reminiscent of the Buddhist-Catholic confrontations at the end of the Diem era. At present, the antagonism between the Buddhist and Catholic religious communities is only a dormant problem. Last fall, following the appointment to the government of some former members of the old Can Lao, the secret political organization that helped Diem control the country, there was some concern that Buddhist-Catholic friction might revive. Thieu apparently judged that danger was slight, however, and communal friction has not developed into a serious problem since then.

21. Of the three current major dissident groups, the militant veterans who are demanding better housing and other benefits present the most difficult problem for the government. The police are not being encouraged to use the same kind of tough measures against the veteran squatters and demonstrators that characterized their actions against students. Some veterans are beginning to use firearms, however, and there have been clashes with police and between veterans' groups at different locales outside Saigon. Veterans in Saigon have been stopping motorists and extorting money from them before letting them pass. Clearly some of the more militant veterans are beginning to consider themselves as a privileged group enjoying special immunity from government restraints. The fact is that every man and officer in the ARVN sees himself as a future veteran and is likely to sympathize with

the veterans if they take a beating from police mob-control squads. In spite of the danger of adverse army reaction, however, the government dares not risk appearing completely ineffectual by letting veteran mob action go unchecked. The Thieu regime has already taken some steps to meet veterans' demands for increased benefits and better housing, and it undoubtedly hopes that the veterans will bear most of the onus in any further clashes with police.

### Economic Unrest

22. Inflation in South Vietnam has persisted this year, with prices increasing at an annual rate of about 50 percent. Administration officials and military men, among others, are selling family possessions and taking extra jobs to make ends meet. Although resentment is still widespread, some psychological adjustment to inflation has taken place. Accordingly, at this point President Thieu seems to be concentrating on doing nothing to spark a new wave of unrest such as was unleashed when he decreed a series of austerity taxes last October. The long-sought enabling legislation on which his anti-inflation program is based is still awaiting attention in the Senate while many Senators are out campaigning for re-election. Thieu is probably happy to have this excuse for inaction because almost any move he could take to reform the economy and damp the inflation is likely to convince most South Vietnamese that the government is to blame for their economic problems.

23. It is problematical whether the government can escape a new wave of economic unrest much longer. The war is a heavy financial burden, as well as a heavy human burden, for the South Vietnamese, and the productivity of the war-torn economy remains limited. There is little confidence in the currency, and the value of the piaster on the black market has been at an extremely low level for several months. So far, Thieu and his advisers have apparently found no way to ease the economic pain without incurring unacceptable political risks.

Fear of Coalition

24. Any development that raises serious doubts about the government's prospects for survival immediately affects its authority, and, if such doubts endure and grow, undermines its ability to hold the country together in the long run. So far, the problem that has caused President Thieu the greatest concern has been the possibility of a negotiated coalition with the enemy.

25. The Communists' confidence in their own cohesion and durability, coupled with their knowledge that the non-Communist South Vietnamese do not cooperate well among themselves, goes a long way to account for their insistence on a coalition government as a key part of any negotiated peace settlement. President Thieu and many others on the non-Communist side seem to agree that coalition would be just a way-station on the road to Communist takeover, and they oppose it adamantly.

26. Although the government has become genuinely more confident as the military and security situations have improved and although it strives to appear confident and relatively flexible at the Paris talks, much of what it does and says is designed to hide a basic lack of confidence in its prospects if a negotiated settlement were to give the Communists a real shot at political power. From mid-1968 until mid-1969, when Thieu considered the possibility of an eventual negotiated settlement, he made two attempts to organize a grand political alliance to support the government. Both the Lien Minh and the NSDF foundered on the competing ambitions of the various prima donnas, including Thieu, who would cooperate only on their own terms. There is nothing in this experience to suggest that the non-Communist politicians will eventually learn to orchestrate their efforts, as the government apparatus and the military establishment are still only learning to do. So far, however, the Communists have let Saigon off the hook in the talks by refusing to negotiate a settlement unless the Saigon leadership first reorganizes itself to enemy satisfaction.

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27. Because the Communists are unlikely to buy anything less than an odds-on chance to win eventual complete control, it is extremely difficult at this stage to foresee the two Vietnamese sides agreeing to a settlement. Assuming that this basic impasse is not broken and that the war is protracted indefinitely, the Communists will undoubtedly look for other ways to encourage and exploit political weaknesses of the government. Partly with this in mind, they are already trying to rebuild their political and subversive infrastructure in the countryside and in the cities.

28. Meanwhile, President Thieu is consistently squelching any renewal of speculation that some version of coalition may be under consideration, and is repeatedly reassuring the country, particularly the armed forces, that the government will never agree to such a solution. The problem of maintaining confidence in the government's prospects for survival will probably become more difficult as US forces are further reduced, especially if the enemy mounts new military pressure on government-controlled areas and inflicts serious losses on the army and on pacification programs. Recurrent anxieties among the South Vietnamese about the steadfastness of US support would then probably intensify, rumors about a deal with the enemy would become more believable, and the government's standing in the country would be weakened.

### Conclusion

29. As of mid-August the government seems to have at least temporarily restrained most of the protest groups, except for the politically sensitive veterans, and it is displaying more confidence in its ability to rule South Vietnam than it showed in May and early June. Dissatisfaction with the economy is likely to get worse during the coming year, however, and South Vietnamese confidence may waver as US forces continue to withdraw.

30. The government has already weathered a number of serious problems, including the schism between President Thieu and Vice-President Ky, the

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Tet offensive of 1968, the trauma of negotiating with the Communists in Paris, last fall's economic unrest, and last spring's wave of protest agitation. Although these problems were not handled in an outwardly impressive way, the government's record suggests that it may muddle through over the next year or so as Vietnamization proceeds.

31. If, however, it does not manage to cope with future stresses or challenges to its authority, the consequences will be serious. The most likely alternatives to the present constitutional government--a military regime or a new era of instability--are both unpromising. The enemies of a military regime, Communists and non-Communists, would exploit the establishment of a military government in their appeals to the American public, adding to the difficulties of an orderly turnover of US military responsibilities to the Vietnamese. Aside from a military regime, however, no single group or alliance seems to have the cohesion to govern effectively. In a new era of instability, the danger would be great that South Vietnam would come apart at the seams politically, despite the demonstrated progress of her armed forces.

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