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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

14 February 1963

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Policy Staff, NSA

SUBJECT: NIE 53-63: THE PROSPECTS IN SOUTH VIETNAM

The attached conclusions and post-mortem for subject estimate are forwarded for review. These items will be considered with the text dated 11 February 1963 at a meeting of the USIB representatives scheduled for 1000, Wednesday, 20 February.

[Redacted Signature]

ABBOT SMITH  
Deputy Assistant Director  
National Estimates

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SUBJECT: NIE 53-63: PROSPECTS IN SOUTH VIETNAM

THE PROBLEM

To assess the situation and prospects in South Vietnam, with special emphasis upon the military and political factors most likely to affect the counterinsurgency effort.

CONCLUSIONS

A. The Communists are trying to win control of South Vietnam by a campaign of political subversion in which military action plays an important part. They do not appear to be so much interested in seizing or holding territory as in creating a general atmosphere of insecurity, eroding the government image, and sapping the morale of its cadres and supporters. The campaign is largely directed from Hanoi.

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B. The Communist military effort involves about 20,000-24,000 full time regular military personnel and about 100,000 local auxiliaries. Cadres for the regular forces and most of the heavier and more complex equipment are infiltrated from North Vietnam. For lighter weapons, ammunition, and related equipment, they rely primarily upon capture. They also rely upon indigenous sources for food and other nonmilitary supplies. The guerrilla effort could continue to exist without outside support, but this support has almost certainly been essential to the higher levels of military effort achieved in the last year or so.

C. The South Vietnamese counter guerrilla effort has been strengthened during the past year by retraining, reequipment, and improved tactical mobility. Nevertheless, substantial weaknesses remain. Among these are a lack of aggressive and firm leadership at all levels of command, a high desertion rate, lack of trust between peasant and soldier, very inadequate intelligence, and Communist penetration of the South Vietnamese military and civil establishment.

D. In an effort to attack the basic political problem and to restore a degree of confidence in the government, two complementary politico-military programs, the strategic hamlet program and

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clear-and-hold operations, have been instituted and have met with some success. However, the government appears to overestimate the value of the former and to underestimate the importance of the latter; hence, the two programs have not been effectively executed in harmony with each other.

E. During the past year, US involvement has apparently enabled the South Vietnamese regime to check Communist progress and even to improve the situation in some areas. However, there is not at present any adequate basis for a judgment that the tide is running either in one direction or the other.

F. We believe the Communists still aim to win control of South Vietnam without resorting to open invasion. We believe they will continue to wage a war of attrition while standing ready to exploit any opportunity which might arise. They evidently hope that a combination of military pressure against the South Vietnamese regime and political deterioration within it will either create favorable circumstances for delivering a coup de grace or will lead to a political settlement, similar to that in Laos, which would provide the opportunity to continue the struggle on more favorable terms.

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G. With US help, the South Vietnamese regime stands a good chance of at least containing the Communists militarily. However, the modus operandi of the Diem government, and particularly its measures to prevent the rise of contenders for political power, have reduced the government's effectiveness, both politically and militarily. We believe that unless radical changes are made in these methods of government, there is little hope that the US involvement can be substantially curtailed or that there will be a material and lasting reduction in the Communist threat.

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