

~~(S//SI)~~

Chapter 2 – ~~US~~ The Struggle for Heaven's Mandate: SIGINT and the Internal Crisis in South Vietnam, [redacted] 1962

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(U) The post-Geneva settlement left the states of Indochina in political chaos. The French, like most other European colonial powers, had done little to prepare the indigenous populations in the new countries for the difficult job of self-governing and the even harder job of administering the clashing interests of the various ethnic, nationalist, political, religious, and neocolonial interest groups that populated the region. Just reining in these groups so that they did not pose a threat to the new states was enough of a daunting task. The two Vietnams – the communist-dominated Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), known popularly to Americans as North Vietnam, and the Republic of Vietnam (RVN), known as South Vietnam – went their separate ways, afflicted with their own internal problems.

(U) In North Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh and his Viet Minh cadre embarked on a program of agricultural reform. However, the effort soon degenerated into a program of retribution against landlords and rich peasants as Agricultural Reform Tribunals, acting more like flying execution squads, devastated the farming districts of Tonkin and northern Annam already seriously damaged by the many years of revolutionary war and prior French exploitation. By the summer of 1956 Ho Chi Minh ended the tribunals, publicly apologizing for its excesses.

~~(TS//SI)~~ Residual opposition to Hanoi's regime continued to flare up into revolt, and regular Viet Minh military units would have to be called in to suppress what was referred to by Hanoi as "counter-revolutionary activity." In one of the most notable examples, in November 1956 peasants in the mostly Catholic Nghe An province, where Ho had been born, rebelled against the communist regime in Hanoi. The causes for the revolt stemmed from the above-

mentioned poorly administered land reform program which fell prey to overzealous and ignorant party cadre, as well as religious persecution of the Catholic population.¹ [redacted]

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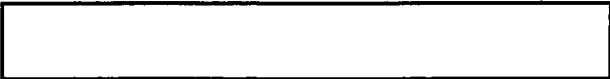
[redacted] It would be months before the area was pacified sufficiently so that the regular military could turn over the maintenance of order to the local militia.

(U) Beginning in 1955, aid from communist states, principally the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China, in the forms of grants, loans, and advisors, began to flow into North Vietnam. Within ten years, Hanoi's economic modernization program allowed it to surpass the South in many industrial and commercial sectors.

(U) While Ho had problems in the DRV, his grip on the reins of power was certain; the Lao Dong Party assured him and his immediate cadre of followers the ability to execute their plan to remake the DRV into a communist state. A well-developed internal security apparatus, which included militia, police, and intelligence forces, enabled the DRV to suppress the remnants of internal opposition, as well as external threats from sabotage and intelligence-gathering teams dispatched by the Republic of Vietnam.

(U) On the other hand, Ho's opposite in Saigon, President Ngo Dinh Diem, had a plethora of problems facing him: a residual French administration suspicious of Diem's nationalist platform, an unsettled tide of Catholic refugees from the north which demanded resettlement and integration into the south, and a multitude of independent political and religious power centers which were potential contenders for control of Saigon and the RVN, as well as a personal threat

to Diem. In the summer of 1954, there were few people covering bets on Diem's survival.



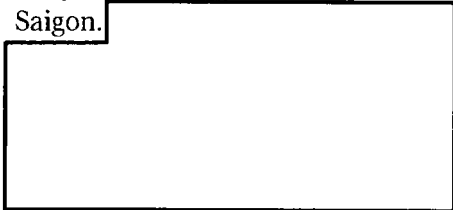
**(U) Ngo Dinh Diem:
The Embattled President**

(U) In June 1954, in the midst of the Geneva talks, Ngo Dinh Diem had been persuaded by Bao Dai to take the reins of the infant government in Saigon. Born in 1901, Diem was a strong nationalist who had been involved in Japanese-inspired plots against the French colonial regime during World War II.³ Austere, isolated, imbued with a religious intensity honed by years of self-imposed exile in various Catholic monasteries around the world, including the Maryknoll Seminary in Lakehurst, New Jersey, Diem had come to the attention of American politicians through his relationship with the American Catholic Cardinal of New York, Francis Spellman. Spellman introduced him to such figures as John F. Kennedy, Mike Mansfield, John Foster Dulles, and Henry Luce.

(U) Yet, from the beginning, achieving control in Saigon was no certainty for Diem. In mid-1954, Diem's appointment by Bao Dai seemed to act as a signal for the start of a number of plots and potential coups by various players and groups in the Saigon scene. Within a month of Diem's appointment, the Vietnamese National Army (VNA) chief of staff, General Nguyen Van Hinh, made moves to put and keep Diem under his control. In one instance, he stationed army tanks a few blocks from the presidential palace – for his "protection" against the forces of the notorious Binh Xuyen criminal syndicate as Hinh explained. Hinh went about Saigon boasting of his connections with the various religious sects and the Binh Xuyen criminal syndicate, and how they all would form a government to succeed the barely arrived Diem.⁵

(U) This initial crisis was resolved in November when Bao Dai ordered General Hinh

~~(TS//SI)~~ Diem had to struggle to establish himself in the face of a variety of opponents. However, by the time of the first RVN elections in October 1955, in which Diem received 98.2 percent of the votes, including one-third more votes than registered voters in Saigon, he had consolidated his position as president of the fledgling Vietnamese republic. In the process of assuming power, Diem forced Bao Dai finally to abdicate his position as head of state. Bao Dai would go into exile, but never quite went away from the political scene in Saigon.



(U) Vietnamese president Ngo Dinh Diem with U.S. vice-president Lyndon Johnson (May 1961)

to visit him in Paris. General Hinh, seeing his position fading under American pressure, agreed and left Vietnam, knowing he was going into permanent exile.

(U) With Hinh gone from the picture, Diem, with American support, turned on the French. Under Geneva, the French had retained a substantial portion of its expeditionary force in South Vietnam -- some 160,000 troops. They were there ostensibly to protect the shaky Saigon government from any communist military threats. However, it was known about Saigon that the French did not like Diem and were influencing other groups against the president. The Americans were anxious to rid the French influence and "set Vietnam on the right direction." Since Washington was still bankrolling the French forces, it pressured Paris into leaving by reducing the subsidy to its forces.⁶ The French, realizing that they could not afford to maintain their military presence and seeing that their influence in Saigon had waned, accelerated their withdrawal.

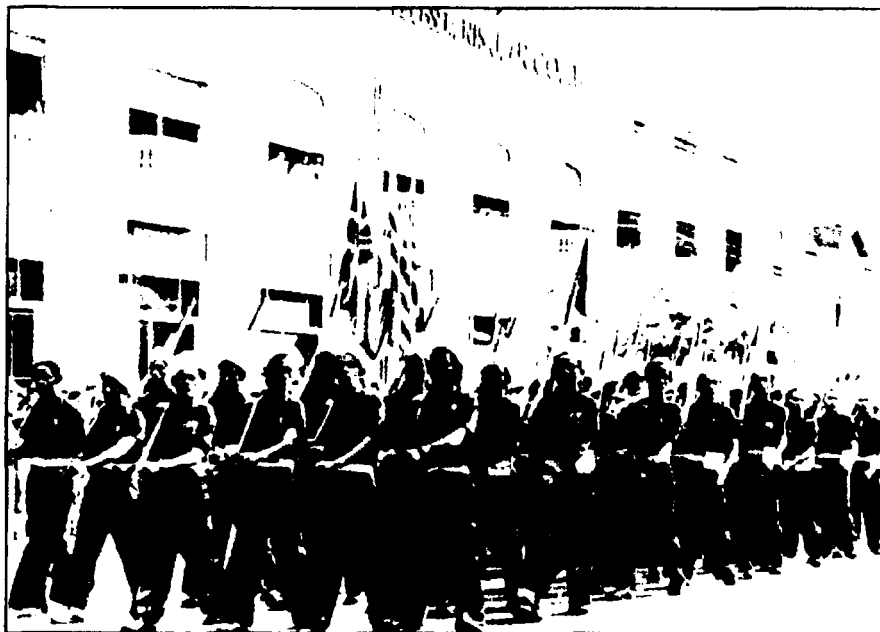
(U) However, even with the hastening French departure, there were still threats to Diem's rule, and the Americans still were not all that impressed with Diem's chances.⁷ The remaining problem for Diem was with the other contenders for power, the religious sects and the Binh Xuyen crime syndicate. Each group had an agenda and an army to see it carried out.

(U) The Cao Dai sect, centered in Tay Ninh Province north of Saigon, was a religious body whose doctrine

consisted of a charmingly eclectic blend of spiritualism, Buddhism, and Christianity; three of its spiritual "fathers" included Sun Yatsen, the founder of the Chinese Republic; the French poet and novelist Victor Hugo; and the Vietnamese prophet Trang Tinh. The sect was founded in 1919 by a Pham Cong Tac, who became its "Pope." By the 1950s, the Cao Dai claimed as many as one million followers.

(U) The Hoa Hao sect, with another one million adherents, was a "reformed" variety of the Theravada Buddhist sect. The sect emphasized simplicity in life and rituals and preached a line of social justice. Based mostly in the southern portion of the Mekong Delta, the sect lacked a single leader, but had a private army of about 20,000 men. Both sects had been favored and encouraged in their separatist tendencies by the Japanese during their occupation of Indochina during World War II.

(U) The Binh Xuyen criminal syndicate (sometimes referred to romantically as "pirates") controlled all vice in the Saigon city limits: gambling, prostitution, narcotics, etc. The syndicate



(U) Troops of the Cao Dai religious sect parading in Saigon

stayed in business through a series of "subsidies" paid to various Vietnamese officials, including Bao Dai. Like the others, it also operated a private army, this one numbering about 3,500 men.

(U) During the Franco-Vietnamese phase of the Indochina War, the French, seeking additional support for their objectives during the war with the Viet Minh, had patronized all three groups with special favors and bribes. In the process, these groups were allowed to build up their own private, well-armed military forces with which they ruled sizable areas of territory. Anxious to maintain their privileged positions, vis-a-vis the government in Saigon, these groups became sources of opposition and intrigue against Diem.

(U) The threat to Diem from the sects and the Binh Xuyen syndicate came together in early March 1955 when the leaders of the two sects and the criminal syndicate formed the United Front of Nationalist Forces and issued a manifesto demanding the formation of a new national government. When the Geneva Accords had been signed, all three groups had seen their subsidies from the French end. They were fearful of losing

their private armies, which were their remaining power base, to Saigon's plan to integrate these forces into the new Vietnamese National Army. In this crisis, Diem was advised by the Americans and French representatives in Saigon to negotiate with the three groups. Diem refused. The American special delegate to Diem, General J. Lawton Collins, was angered by Diem's stubborn stand and advised Washington that, as a result of his intransigence, Diem could fall. Diem, angered by the American failure to back him against the sects, turned to his family and the shadowy CIA official, General Edward Lansdale, for help.⁸

(U) Diem subverted the two religious sects through a policy of bribery and persuasion; most of their generals and warlords "rallied" to Diem along with their private forces. The Binh Xuyen criminal syndicate remained alone in its opposition. Unable to tolerate their defiance, which included sporadic attacks against VNA troops, on 28 April Diem ordered his units to wipe out the Binh Xuyen strongholds in the Cholon section of Saigon. Heavy fighting in the city lasted for almost a week; even the presidential palace was shelled by the Binh Xuyen. By 2 May, the Binh



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Vietnamese
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putting
down Binh
Xuyen
uprising in
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Saigon

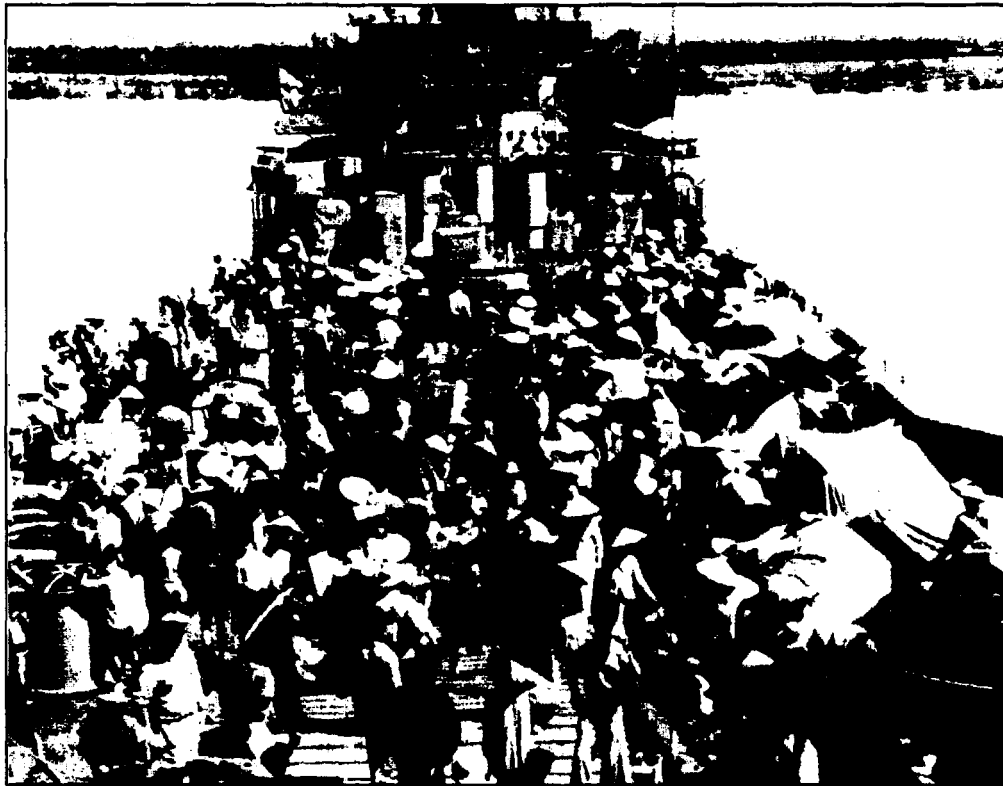
Xuyen had been driven from the capital and destroyed as a power in Vietnamese politics. The remnants of the syndicate's forces, as well as renegade sect units would move into the countryside and join the Vietnamese communist forces.

(U) Diem's support came mainly from the small Catholic minority in South Vietnam whom he showered with economic handouts, political offices, and land. These favors also were extended to the refugee Catholics from North Vietnam, who numbered about 900,000. Many of these Vietnamese Catholics had lived in the French-created bishoprics of Phat Dien and Bui Chu near Haiphong, and had mostly supported the French during that phase of the Indochina War. After Geneva, an exodus of these people began - about 300,000 were transported south by ships of the U.S. Seventh Fleet; another 600,000 walked south. At the time, this large-scale movement of refugees was considered a propaganda victory for Saigon and Washington, because it apparently subverted Hanoi's claim as the only legitimate nationalist successor to the French.

(U) Later, it would be revealed that the Vietnamese Catholics had been subjected to an intense propaganda offensive by Saigon and the agit-prop experts from CIA.

Playing on the intense religious and anticommunist feelings of the Catholics, local priests would claim that either "Christ" has gone to the South, or that "The Virgin Mary has departed the North." The Saigon government and the CIA operatives, under the command of Colonel Lansdale, also offered land and draft animals to those who went south. The propagandists also circulated stories of Viet Minh concentration camps and an American air attack against the North, which hinted at the possible use of nuclear weapons on Hanoi.⁹

(U) The Catholic influx reinforced Diem's only really effective power base - this was a highly organized group with which he shared religious and anticommunist sympathies. The U.S. provided Diem with almost \$300 million to pay for the refugee resettlement in the south. Many entire villages with their priests just relocated to the regions in South Vietnam that were considered



(U) Catholic refugees from northern Vietnam aboard U.S. Navy LST

important to Diem's security. Many of the new three hundred and more villages created by Diem to accommodate the northern refugees were located in critical areas around Saigon; more were established in the equally strategic Central Highlands.¹⁰ Catholics were often favored with access to American aid and advanced agricultural techniques. A phrase heard in South Vietnam reflected this favoritism: "Turn Catholic and have rice to eat."¹¹

(U) However, even with this influx of northern refugees, the Catholic minority in South Vietnam was never more than about 12 percent of the population. In a country which was predominantly Buddhist, the Vietnamese Catholic population was too narrow a support base for Diem's government. His program of resettlement for the refugees, which displaced minority Khmer and Montagnard, created more centers of resistance which the growing communist movement exploited.¹² Ultimately, the historic animosity between Catholic and Buddhist in Vietnam, created by the French, and which was exacerbated by this influx from the north and fanned by Diem's policies favoring the Catholics, would prove fatal to his rule.

(U) As the date of the plebiscite mandated by the Geneva Accords (20 July 1956) approached, North Vietnam vainly tried to open consultations with South Vietnam. In early June 1955, Pham Van Dong, North Vietnam's prime minister and former chief delegate to the Geneva Conference, declared that the North was ready to hold elections in which "all parties, organizations, and individuals can take part." A month later, backed by the Americans, Diem rejected Pham's proposal claiming that since South Vietnam had not signed the Geneva Accords that it was not bound by them. Diem added that he was uncertain if the communists were pushing Moscow's policy or a higher national (read Vietnamese) interest. Washington's position was simply that, if a plebiscite was held, even one totally free and supervised by an international group, the com-

munists would win. The North tried once more to arrange a meeting on the plebiscite with Diem, asking him in July 1955 to nominate delegates to a pre-election conference, but Diem rejected this overture totally out of hand. The plebiscite idea was dead; 20 July 1956 would come and go without elections.

(U) Diem's War against Internal Dissent

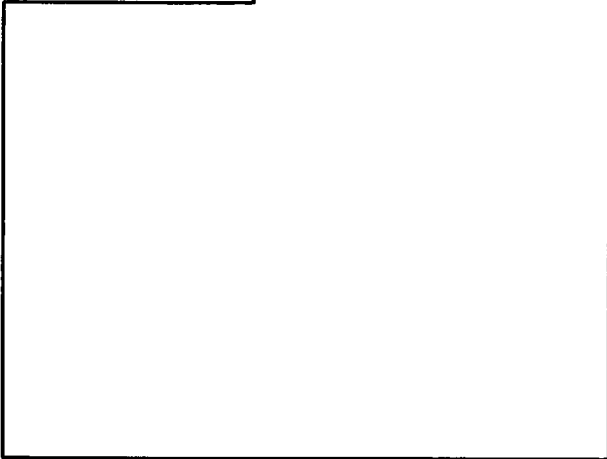
(U) Most of internal dissent against President Diem was inflamed by his program of wholesale political repression, not just of the Viet Minh cadre who stayed in the south after Geneva, but against all opposition, whether it was communist or not.

(U) He started his attack in mid-1955 when he launched an Anti-Communist Denunciation Campaign. Within a year, the Saigon regime claimed that almost 100,000 former communists had rallied to the government or had surrendered. Since there were only about an estimated 10,000 so-called "stay behinds," or Viet Minh, in the south, it is hard to correlate Saigon's number of communist ralliers to anything resembling political reality.¹³ However, the onslaught was ruthlessly effective: within two years, Diem's repression against the Viet Minh reduced its ranks to barely half their original number.¹⁴

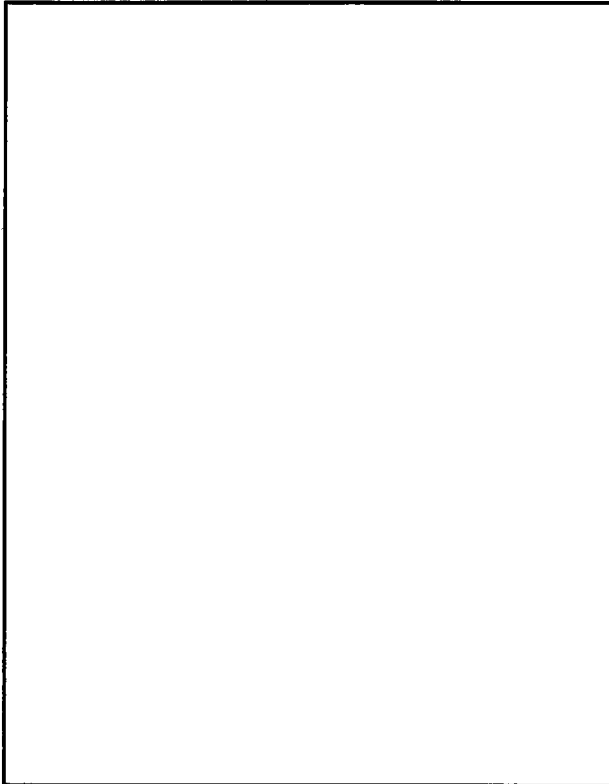
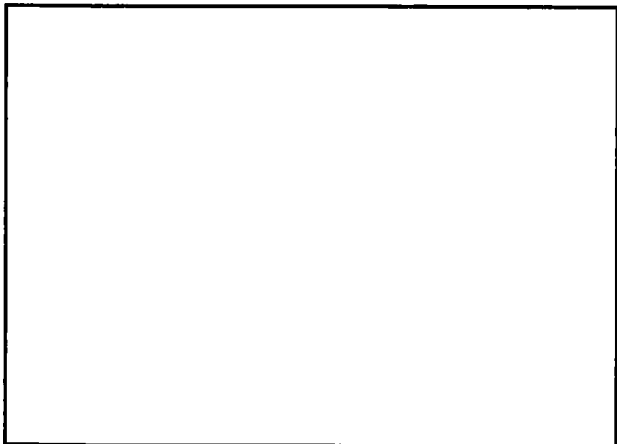
(U) Under Diem's Ordinance Number 6 of January 1956, the Saigon government's security organs were given virtually a free hand to eliminate all opposition. Until order and security were restored, went Saigon's claim, anyone considered a danger "to the defense of the state and public order" was to be placed under house arrest or imprisoned. The results of this law were predictable. Even *Life* magazine, a Luce publication considered friendly to Diem, observed in a 13 May 1957 article reporting on his war against all opposition:

... Only known or suspected Communists who have threatened public security since July 1954 [Geneva Accords] are supposed to be arrested and 'reeducated' under these decrees. But many non-communists have also been detained. The whole machinery of security has been used to discourage active opposition of any kind from any source.

~~(TS//SI)~~ Yet, during the same process of neutralizing all opposition, Diem sowed the seeds for his future downfall.



(U) What was a very real outcome of Diem's program was the increased number of imprisonments of all of Diem's opponents, regardless of their political leanings. The South Vietnamese Ministry of Information claimed that over 48,000 people had been jailed between 1954 and 1960, but other observers claimed far in excess of that.¹⁷



(U) Diem's regime also pursued policies designed to antagonize a large portion of the ethnic Montagnard tribes living in the central mountainous region, often referred to as the Tay Nguyen, or the western highlands, which include the Provinces of Kontum, Darlac, Pleiku, Quang Duc, Tuyen Duc, and Lam Dong. This portion of South Vietnam often figured in the strategic planning for both Saigon and Washington, who realized that its control by the communists could threaten to split the country.

(U) The Montagnard tribesman had been granted a measure of autonomy by the French during the earlier war against the Viet Minh. But Diem moved to control the tribes more closely. In March 1955, the Tay Nguyen region lost its autonomy and was incorporated into the South Vietnamese state. Diem moved to impose



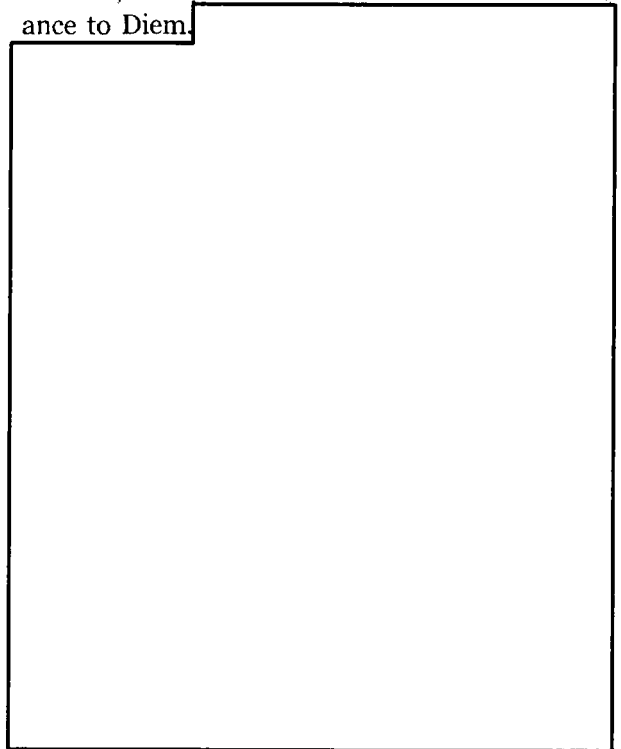
(U) Montagnard tribesmen

Vietnamese culture on these groups. Saigon-appointed officials reflected the typical air of superiority towards the Montagnard, referring to them as "savages." Few Montagnard were allowed to attend schools; where there were schools available to them, courses were taught solely in Vietnamese.

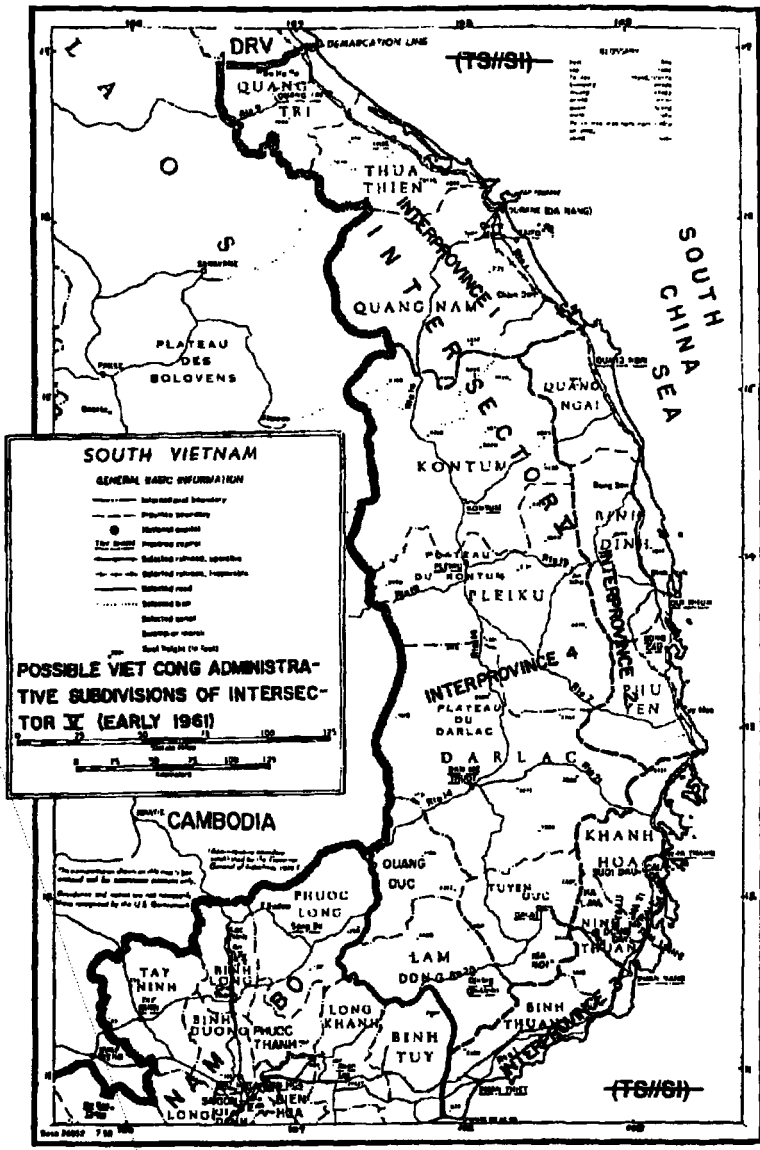
(U) In 1957, Saigon further alienated the Montagnard by relocating 210,000 ethnic Vietnamese from the coastal areas into fortified villages on traditionally tribal lands. In 1959, Diem authorized the transfer of the Montagnard into similar towns often consolidating a number of different tribes into single camps, a practice that could only lead to further strife.

~~(TS//SI)~~ The effect of these policies on the mountain people of the Tay Nguyen was pre-

dictable, and the area became a center of resistance to Diem.



(U) The peasants were another group victimized by a lack of land reform. For example, by 1960 50 percent of cultivated land in the Mekong Delta was owned by only 2 percent of the population.²⁴ In regions where the Viet Minh had redistributed land to the peasants – the Viet Minh were able to transfer an estimated one-and-a-half million acres of land away from landlords during the French war – Diem organized a policy of reversing these gains and returned the land to the landlords and, in many cases, required the payment of back rent by the affected tenants!²⁵ Diem managed to further antagonize the peasants by destroying the only democratic institution functioning in the country: village elections. It had been once a maxim in the French empire that its rule "stopped at the village gates." Villagers had remained free to elect village councils and leaders. Diem abolished these elections, opting instead to appoint his own supporters, many of them military officers, to the village posts.



(U) Considering the broad range of Diem's coercive practices and unpopular social and political policies, as well as the large number of target-

ed groups, it is somewhat remarkable that a general insurrection by the southern communists, or one involving a coalition of disaffected groups which would have been led by the communists, did not break out during this period. The most important factor that contributed to this lack of any sizable rebellion was that Diem had been very successful with his general attacks against all centers of resistance, whether it be communist, nationalist, religious-political, and ethnic. As we have seen, in the five years he had been in office,

Diem had managed to break up or seriously reduce the effectiveness of these centers – the communists, the Cao Dai and Hao Hoa, the Binh Xuyen criminal syndicate, army officers, the peasants, and Montagnard. Most of these groups could not hope to regain their former position since they were without a power base inside South Vietnam or without a source of outside help. However, there was one exception – the southern communists who had an outside ally in Hanoi. And, in the summer of 1959, Hanoi finally had decided to intervene in the south.

**(U) “It is time for the struggle”:
Hanoi and the Southern Insurrection**

(U) At first, Hanoi was slow to move to support the southern “comrades.” The Hanoi leadership, particularly Ho Chi Minh, had been certain that Diem, when he first assumed power, could not create a viable state south of the seventeenth parallel. Although Le Duan, Ho’s political understudy, heir apparent, and spokesman for the southern cause, had been urging an intensification of the campaign of subversion and terrorism against Saigon during the 1950s, Ho had remained cautious in his program. Thinking that Diem eventually would fall because of the backlash from his own policy of suppression, Ho was wary of endangering the hard-won gains of Hanoi’s industrialization program.²⁸ Hanoi’s leadership had been fixated with internal economic development and discouraged any diversion of resources to the south.²⁹ It took the persuasive appeals from Le Duan to move the party leadership along to the declaration of support to the southerners during the 15th Plenum in May 1959. (See Chapter 3, pages 85-86, for more details on the 15th Plenum and the decision to intervene in the southern insurrection.)

(U) Previous to 1959, without Hanoi’s active intervention or support, the southern communists had been left to rely on their own devices to battle Diem’s suppression of their movement. In response to Diem’s depredations, the southern



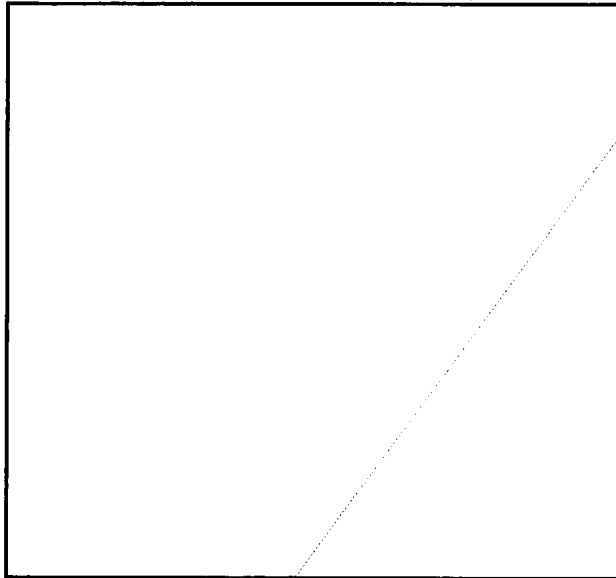
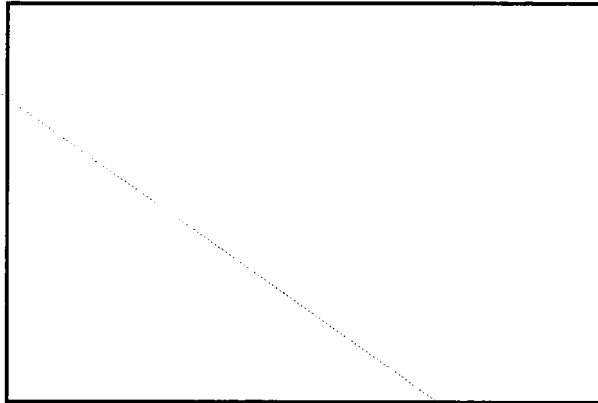
(U) Le Duan, Lao Dong Party leader next to Ho Chi Minh at Third Party Congress (September 1960)

communists had increased their political activity, which included agitation, organization of party cells, and propaganda activities. To facilitate the latter, in mid-1958 they had established a clandestine radio station, the Voice of the South Vietnam Liberation Front.

~~(TS//SI)~~ It was in the military sphere that the southern communists made their most important moves. In October 1957, a coordinated military command structure was organized in the Mekong Delta that included thirty-seven armed companies. The next summer saw the command structure expanded to include the eastern portion of Nam Bo, the region formerly known as Cochin. Renegade elements of the Binh Xuyen syndicate and the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao religious sects, driven into the jungles by Diem’s attacks, had joined up with the communists by mid-1958.³⁰ These units would augment the first Vietnamese Communist (VC) combat units in battles against Diem’s forces. In the eastern Nam Bo region, Binh Xuyen units would operate effectively for the communists through 1962. At the same time,

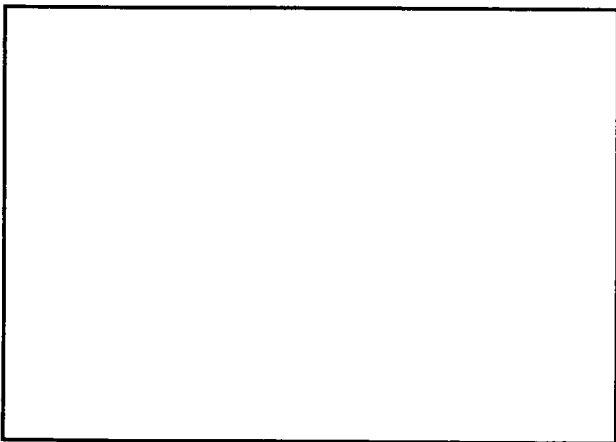


(U) Acts of political terrorism and armed attacks on ARVN outposts and units increased steadily from 1957 to 1959. Most of the activity was in the region to the northwest and southwest of Saigon – traditional communist strongholds in the Mekong Delta and the Plain of Reeds on the Cambodian border. Much of the violence was directed at vulnerable targets: isolated government teams would be wiped out, and village and provincial officials appointed by Diem would be assassinated. Some spectacular military actions occurred in mid-1958 at the Michelin and Minh Thanh Rubber Plantations which demonstrated ARVN's inability to match the communist's combat effectiveness.³² In July 1958, the American embassy observed that "in many remote areas, the central government has no effective control."³³



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(U) With the implementation of Hanoi's new policy in May 1959, communist activity in the south increased exponentially. Assassinations of officials and leading citizens doubled in the last half of 1959 compared to the first half. Kidnapping went up by 50 percent, while Viet Cong-initiated attacks and ambushes on government troops averaged over one hundred a month in the closing months of 1959.³⁴



(U) Strangely, both Diem and the United States Military Advisory and Assistance Group (USMAAG) viewed the late 1959 upswing in Viet Cong activity as a sort of "last gasp," a desperate effort to retrieve the political and military situation in the face of Diem's counterinsurgency program. In September 1959, Diem would tell General Samuel Williams, chief of the USMAAG, that the "strategic battle against the VC has been won; now remains the tactical battle."³⁸ As we have seen earlier, there was some validity to this impression; Diem's measures had made their mark on the membership of the Viet Cong. Yet, the true measure of this policy lay in the growing disaffection throughout the country for Diem's leadership. The communists were not the only

focus of opposition, and the next year would be one of revelation for Diem's American advisors.

(U) Nineteen sixty opened with a disaster for the South Vietnamese military. On 26 January 1960, in Tay Ninh Province near the Cambodian border, four companies of VC troops overran the HQ of the ARVN's 32nd Regiment. Besides destroying barracks and headquarters buildings and inflicting sixty-six casualties on the South Vietnamese, the VC made off with enough weapons to arm a battalion. At the same time, a general uprising by the peasants in Ben Tre, the capital of Kien Hoa Province on the Mekong delta, was in full swing.

(U) The litany of disasters followed throughout the early part of the year. In March, three ARVN battalions, engaged in separate sweep operations near the Cambodian border, were ambushed by VC units and forced to retreat. Another ARVN unit which was defending a small hamlet, this time in Kien Giang Province in the extreme southwest of South Vietnam on the Gulf of Thailand, and which had been forewarned of an attack, literally was frightened out of its fortified positions by unarmed civilians advancing on them along with a VC force. The VC then leisurely picked through the deserted village for abandoned weapons and equipment.³⁹

~~(TS//SI)~~ To SIGINT analysts at NSA, the increase in VC activity throughout 1960 was reflected in the continued growth of the communist radio network throughout South Vietnam. New stations on the network seemed to pop up as quickly as toadstools after a spring rain. By the end of that year, NSA estimated that the number of VC radio stations and links in South Vietnam had quadrupled [redacted]. In the Nam Bo region, the area encompassing Saigon and the area of the Mekong River, the numbers were even more striking - a six- and sevenfold increase in stations and links [redacted].

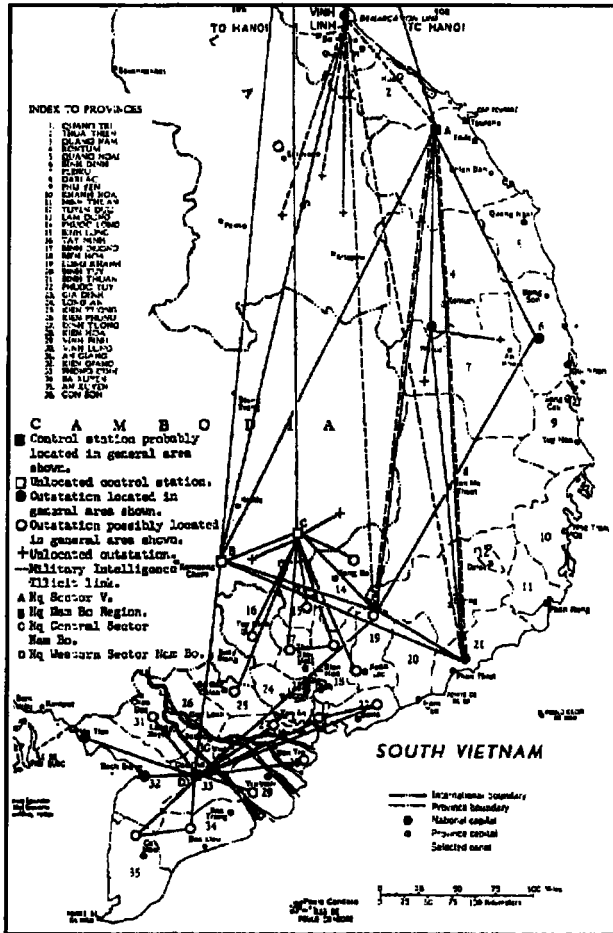
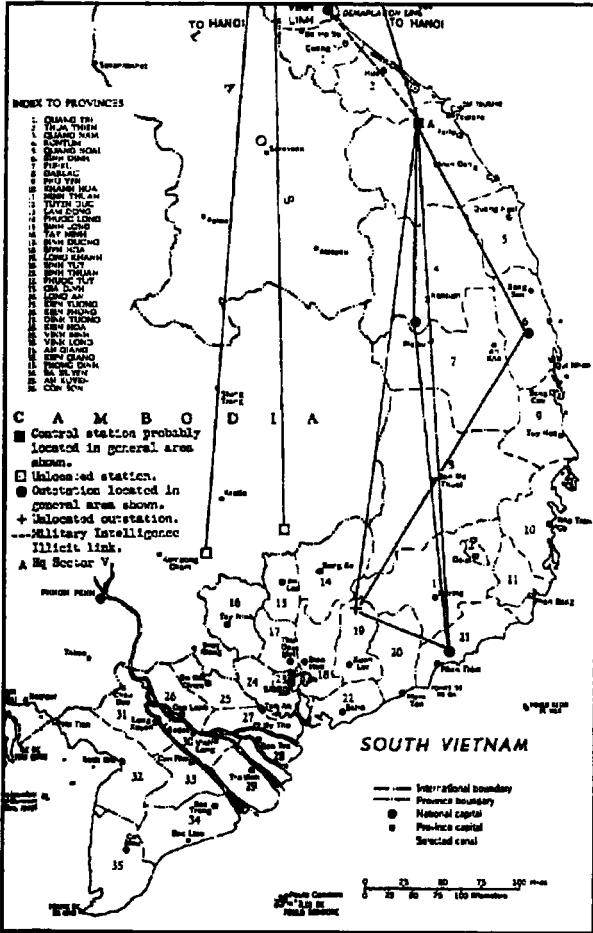
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The report of this virtual explosion in VC communications was so alarming to the U.S. intelligence community, that Allen Dulles reputedly went to see President Kennedy in late January to personally brief him on it.⁴²

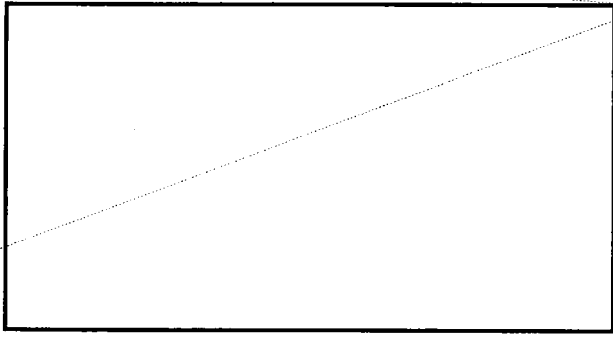
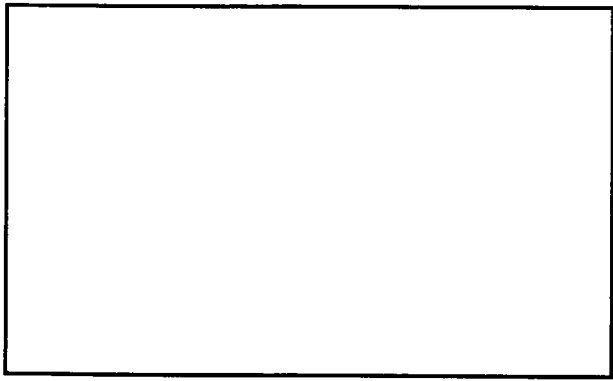
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←TS//SI VC radio networks January 1961



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(S//SI) SIGINT and the Attempted Coups against Diem, 1960-1962

(U) On the morning of 11 November 1960, the residents of Saigon woke up to the sounds of armored fighting vehicles and three battalions of elite South Vietnamese paratroops advancing through its streets towards the presidential palace where Diem and his family were living. When they reached the palace, the paratroops surrounded it and one of the coup's commanders read a manifesto calling for the formation of a new government, political reforms, and an effective prosecution of the war against the communist insurgents. Although there had been reports in Saigon of disaffected military officers within the armed forces, the coup attempt itself came as a nearly complete surprise to most Americans in the city, civilian and military.⁴⁸

(U) That summer and fall of 1960 did see an increase in communist military activity. Fighting in the western regions threatened Saigon's control of those provinces on the Cambodian border, while the VC were in the process of turning the Cau Mau Peninsula, the southernmost portion of South Vietnam, into an enclave with strongholds and areas relatively free from ARVN interference. Even the relatively quiet northern provinces near the DMZ experienced larger attacks by the communists that were bloodying the ARVN forces in that area.

(U) Diem, along with his brother, Nhu, and sister-in-law, barricaded themselves in the basement of the presidential palace and began issuing calls for help over Diem's private radio net to loyal units in the countryside.⁵⁰ To gain further time, Diem pretended to parlay with the coup's leaders, Colonel Nguyen Chanh Thi and Lieutenant Colonel Vuong Van Dong, creating a veneer of capitulation to their demands. Diem's luck held. The coup leaders were disorganized and amateurish. Rather than seize the palace, they preferred to talk. They also neglected to capture the radio stations and other communications centers and failed to set up roadblocks or strongpoints within Saigon so as to control access by units loyal to Diem. When regular infantry formation moved into Saigon, most of the paratroops immediately surrendered and their leaders, if not arrested, fled to Cambodia.

(U) In the middle of October, a joint message from the Departments of Defense and State was dispatched to both the American embassy and advisory command in Saigon directing them to develop an overall plan for support of Diem that would end the emergency and restore stability to Saigon's rule. The emphasis on the plan was to develop a way to defeat the VC, who remained the "primary threat to security."⁴⁷

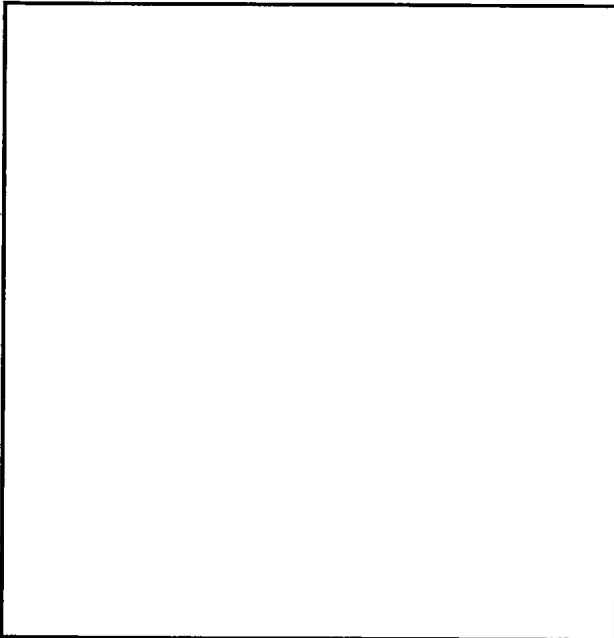
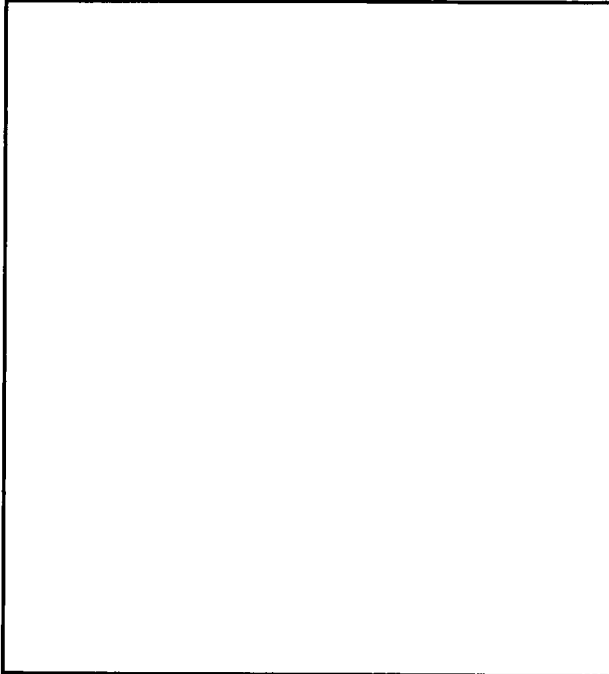
(U) However, while American specialists devised ways to beat the communist insurgency, another threat to Diem's rule was developing in the ranks of his own military and civilian supporters – a threat that would prove ultimately to be directly fatal to his rule, as well as to his life.

(U) However, Diem learned the wrong lessons from the coup. He believed that he could disre-

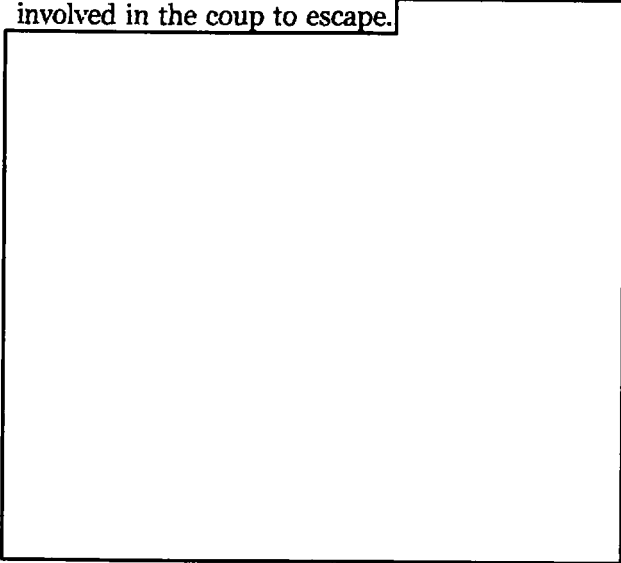
gard the regular military chain of command. Instead, he would come to rely on the personal loyalty of a unit and its commander. This further subverted the ARVN's military effectiveness. Many of Diem's opponents discovered that he, if pressed, would agree to any reforms, but would renege when he regained his position of power. In the post-coup period, the Americans were further disenchanted with Diem's political agenda and the Vietnamese military's again demonstrated incompetence and unreliability.⁵¹

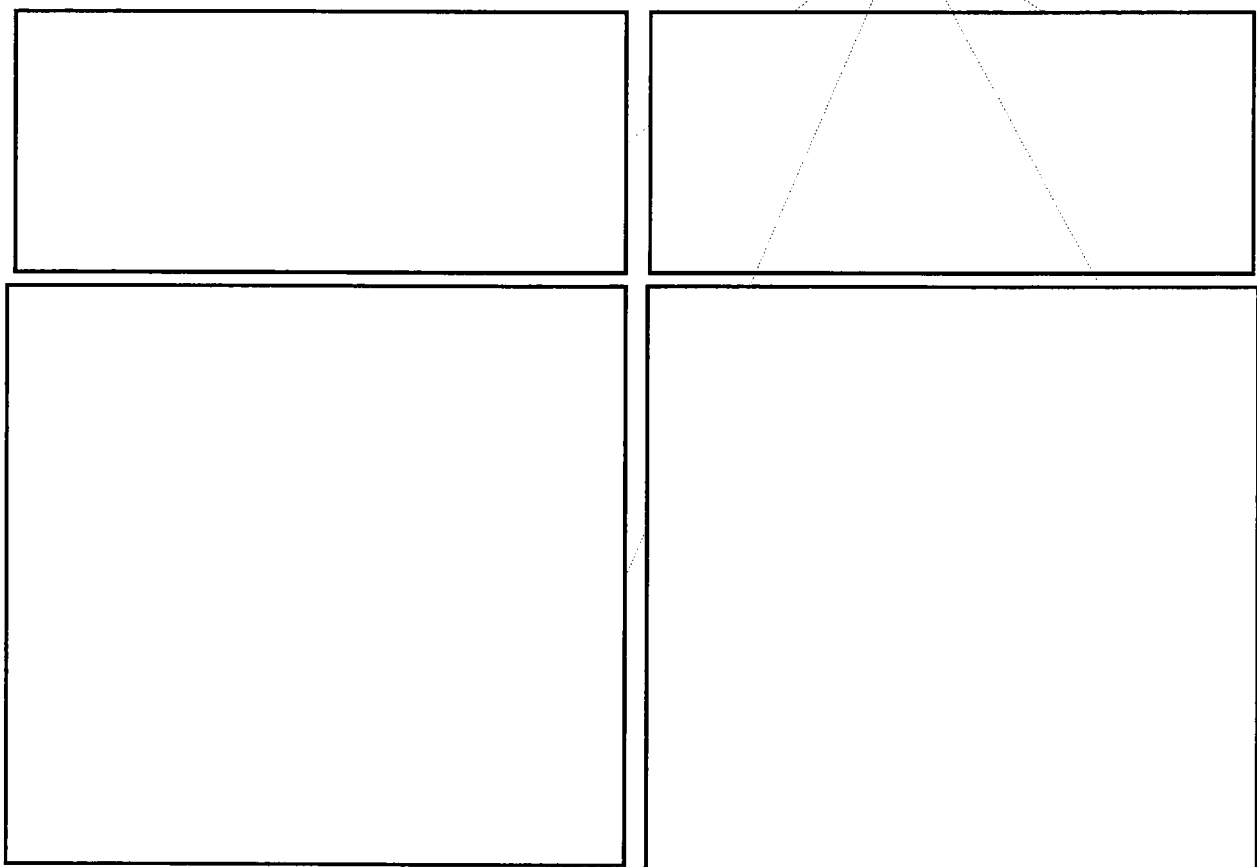
~~(S//SI)~~ American SIGINT had been surprised by the coup, as had American intelligence in general. In the coup's aftermath, SIGINT analysts discovered, through decrypted VC regional head-quarter messages, that the communists were taking an active interest in the failed coup, learning valuable lessons from its shortcomings, which would translate into plans to take advantage of any future maneuvers against Diem.

~~(TS//SI)~~ It also was clear from the intercept that the attempted seizure of power by the paratroops had caught the southern communists by surprise just as much as the Americans. In the mad scramble for positioning that followed, the Viet Cong HQ in the Nam Bo region directed subordinate elements to help soldiers, officers, and others (politicians and security personnel) involved in the coup to escape.

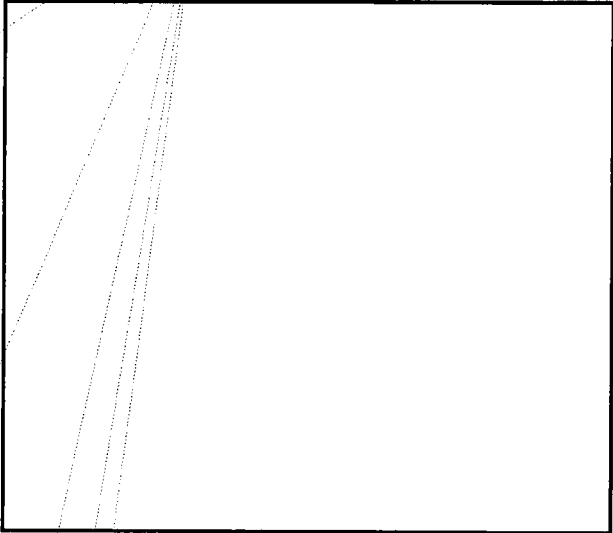
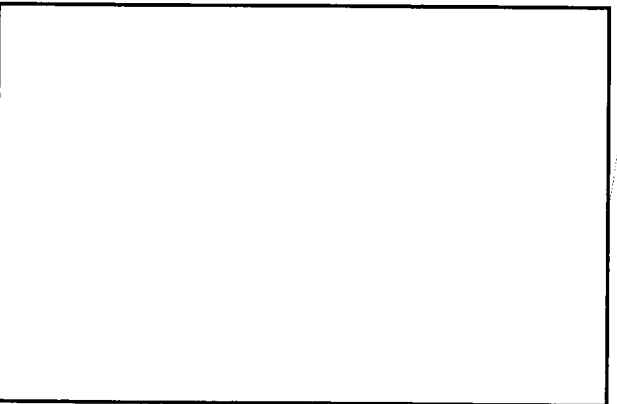
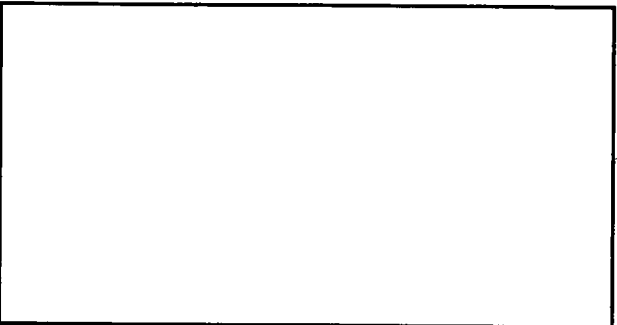
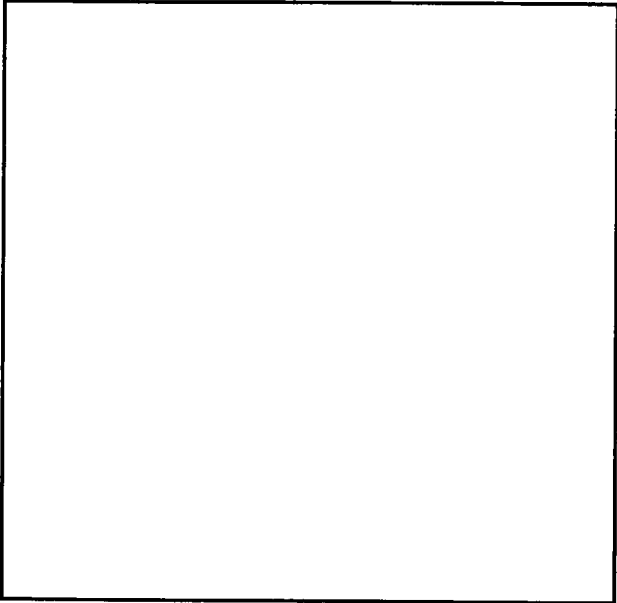


EO 1.4.(c)





(U) ARVN troops manning barricades during a coup attempt



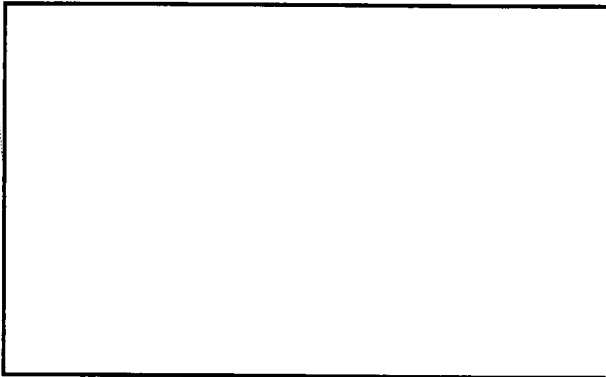
~~(TS//SI)~~ Were the communists on to something? There is no doubt that they were correct in their assessment of Washington's disenchantment with Diem's failure to adopt a course of political and social reform and then stick to it. Whether or not the VC were correct in believing that the Americans were contacting dissident Vietnamese politicians and generals to facilitate a coup against Diem is not so clear. The American attitude towards Diem was always ambivalent; since 1961, Kennedy administration officials remained divided over support for Diem. But there is no evidence that the U.S. instigated any coups against Diem. Washington did not have to do anything. The Vietnamese officers and politicians were proficient enough at devising coup plans of their own.

(U) There were contacts between CIA agents and their Vietnamese counterparts: some CIA operatives, such as Lucius Conein, had a long record of operations within Indochina and were friendly with a number of Vietnamese general officers. Also, there were several thousand American military and civilian advisors in South Vietnam at this time; many of them were attached to the newly started counterinsurgency and civic action programs. But, there is no real evidence that they were influencing their hosts against Diem. It would not be until late 1963, when the

EO 1.4.(c)

coup that finally toppled Diem was well into the planning stage, that Americans would be contacted by the Vietnamese generals who were involved in the planning. (See Chapter 4, pages 160-162, for more details on the U.S. knowledge of the November 1963 coup against Diem.)

~~(TS//SI)~~ In March of 1962, the Viet Cong intelligence apparatus in the Nam Bo continued to make coup assessments, adding that the anti-Diem faction, which was never identified in any detail, now felt that Diem had too much support to peacefully remove him and that it intended to assassinate Diem. The Vietnamese president had too many circles of support within the government.

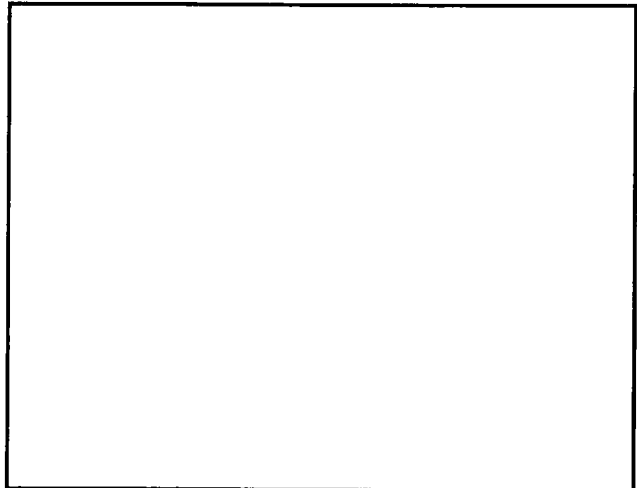


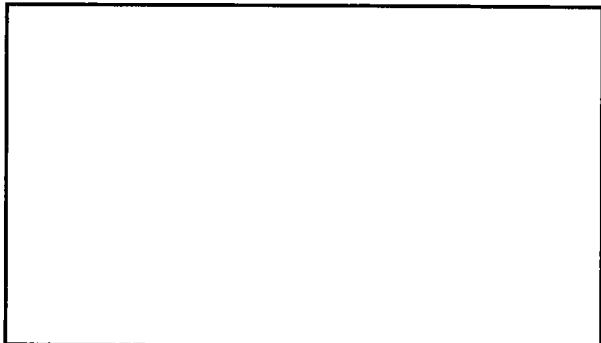
(U) The Formation of the National Liberation Front, December 1960

(U) On 20 December 1960, at a secret base outside of Saigon, the existence of the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam, informally referred to as the National Liberation Front (NLF, *Mat Tran Dan Toc Giai Phong Mien Nam*), was announced. The NLF proclaimed a ten-point platform which combined a variety of demands that could appeal to the general Vietnamese population. Among them were the expected calls for American withdrawal and the removal of the Diem regime. However, the Front also called for social, economic and cultural

changes such as higher wages for civil servants and the military, land distribution for the peasants, equality of sexes, equal status for ethnic and tribal minorities, the expansion of domestic industry over imports, and the removal of foreign (read American) cultural influences. Finally, the NLF issued a demand for normalizing relations between the two Vietnams prior to a final peaceful reconciliation and reunification.

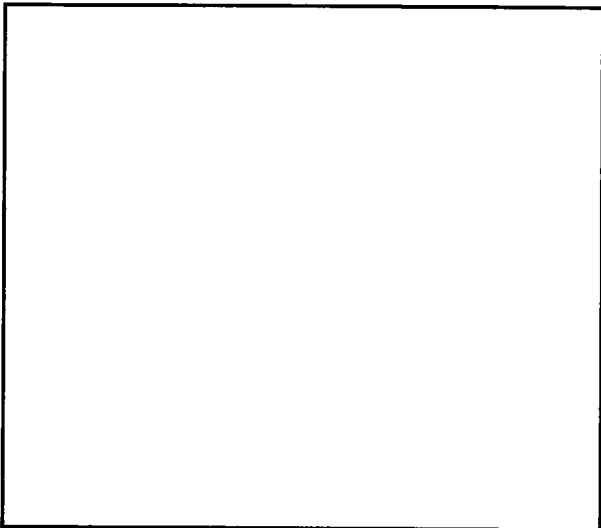
~~(TS//SI)~~ The makeup of the NLF was designed to attract as wide a following as possible from all sectors and classes of Vietnamese society. As such, the NLF soft peddled its communist core in favor of a united, or "popular front" facade. It publicized the number and diversity of noncommunist groups gathered under the NLF banner: various "associations" representing women, workers, peasants, youth groups, students, writers and artists, journalists, the aged, children, Chinese national residents, businessmen, ethnic minorities, socialists and former members of Diem's military. Buddhists, Catholics, even remnants of the disbanded Hoa Hao, Cao Dai, and Binh Xuyen elements were included under the NLF's tent.⁶⁹ The prominence of the Lao Dong Party was disguised. A provisional NLF Central Committee was formed at the time of the announcement which was headed by a dissident Saigon lawyer, Nguyen Huu Tho, who had recently been released from prison for his part in earlier protests against Diem.





(U) The truth is, the formation of the NLF probably marked the final eclipse for any viable, independent, noncommunist, and nationalist alternative to Diem's rule. As far back as the 1930s, noncommunist nationalist organizations essentially had been destroyed by the French colonial security (*surete*) apparatus, especially after the Yen Bay uprising in 1930. Splinter groups with little popular support remained, but were often subsumed under united fronts such as the Chinese-backed Dong Minh Hoi or buried under Viet Minh-controlled governments in North Vietnam. Nationalist alternatives to the communists or Diem simply had not been a politically viable option in Vietnam for decades.

EO 1.4.(c)



(U) In South Vietnam during the 1950s, as we have seen, President Diem had pursued noncommunist, nationalist opponents with as much zeal as he had reserved for the Viet Minh remnants. The last flare-ups of such groups occurred in early 1960. Then, in April 1960 an elite group of such opponents, including ten former cabinet ministers, met at the Caravelle Hotel across the street from Diem's newly established National Assembly. This group, impeccably anticommu-



← NLF Central Committee at Front congress in 1967. Nguyen Huu Tho is pictured at center of the front row.

nist, but staunchly nationalist, issued a respectful, but nonetheless devastating critique of Diem's regime: his elections were undemocratic, the National Assembly was a farce, the army incompetent, the economy was corrupt, and public opinion and the press had been gagged into silence. The signatories, which included Huu, appealed to Diem to institute reforms. Otherwise, they contended, the tide would turn and Diem could be swept away.⁷⁴

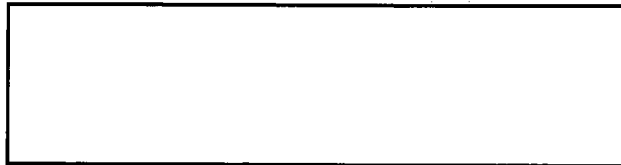
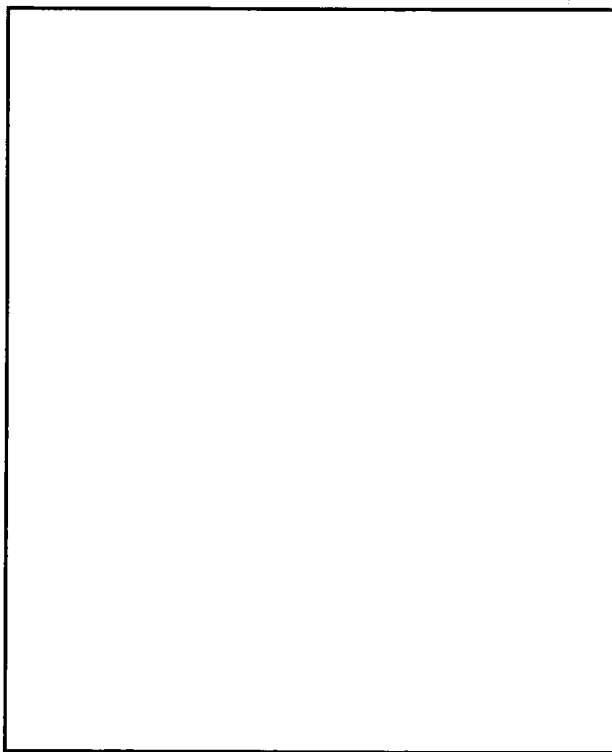
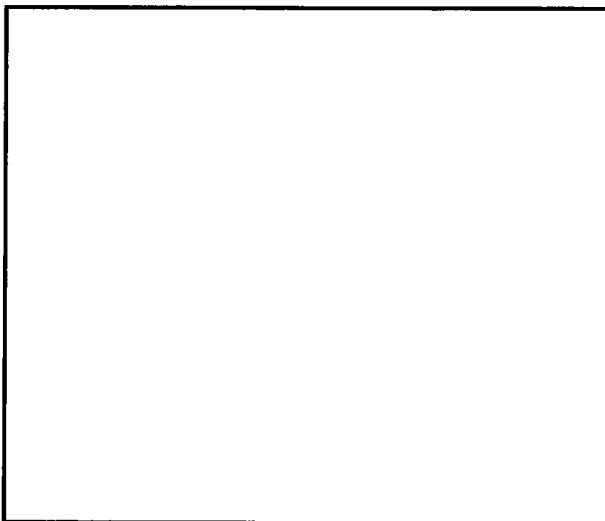
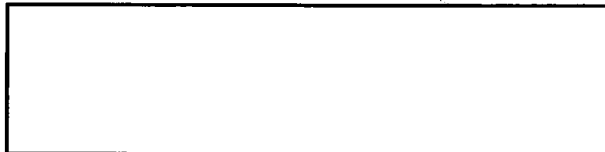
(U) Diem's response had been to label the Caravelle petitioners as communists. He used the NLF's declaration as an excuse for another wave of newspaper closings and ordered the arrests of more students, journalists, intellectuals, and opposition politicians. For all practical purposes, by late 1960 legitimate political opposition to Diem in South Vietnam, outside of the NLF and the soon-to-explode Buddhists, was finished. In prison, in exile, or allied to the communists, there were no more alternatives to the Ngo family's control of the country. From now on, opposition would center around three axes: the communist NLF, the South Vietnamese military, and the increasingly restive Buddhist majority.

~~(S//SI)~~ For the Americans, the situation in Indochina was heating up. The increasing internal tensions in South Vietnam, with the communist participation in them, and the communist advances in Laos, all pointed to the possibility of American involvement. The SIGINT community saw the necessity of an increased capability to cover the region. The handful of assets available outside Southeast Asia simply were not adequate to meet the needs for intelligence. Already, though, moves were afoot to meet the challenge.

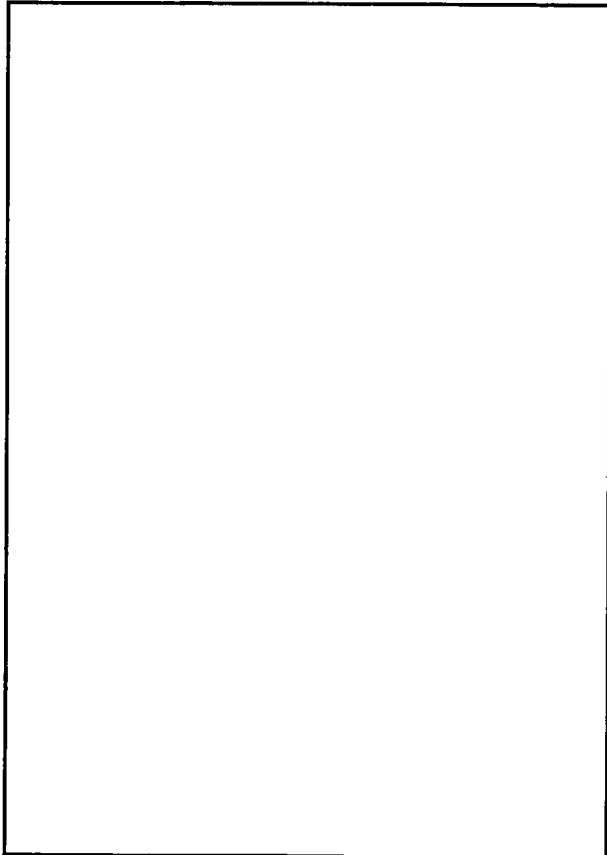
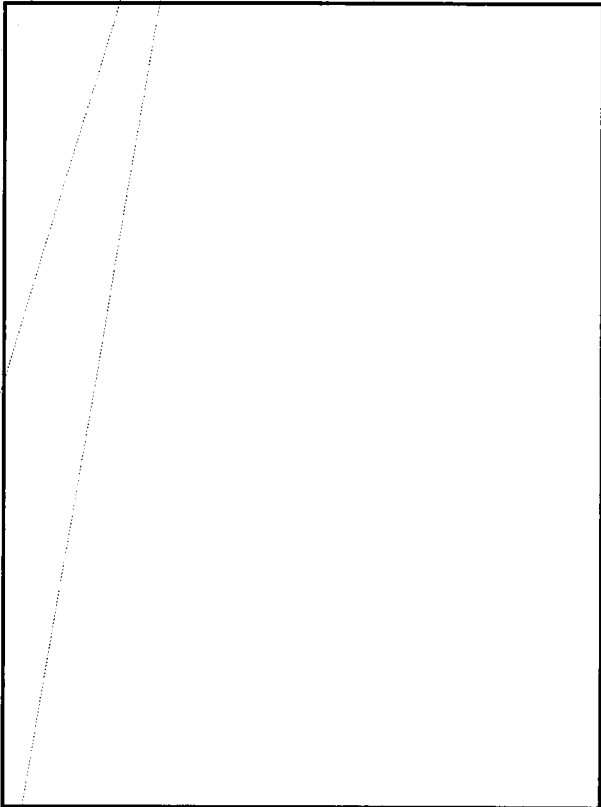
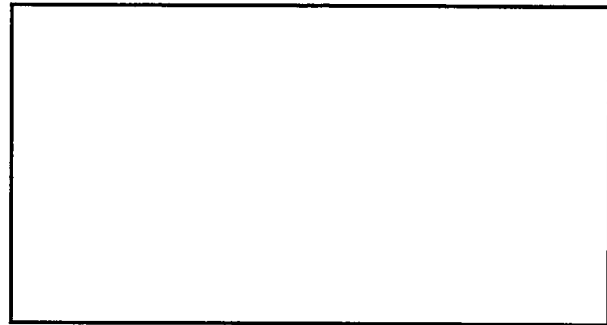
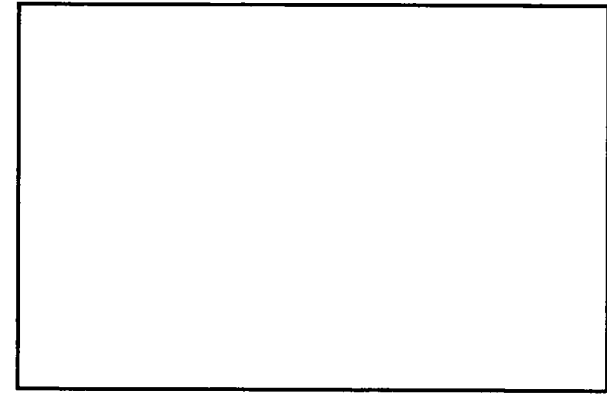
(S//SI)

~~TOP SECRET//COMINT//X1~~ **America Plans the Mainland SIGINT Buildup, [redacted] 1961**

~~(TS//SI)~~ In 1959, the problem for American cryptology in Southeast Asia could be seen just by glancing at a map of SIGINT sites in the larger Asian region. [redacted]



~~TOP SECRET//COMINT//X1~~

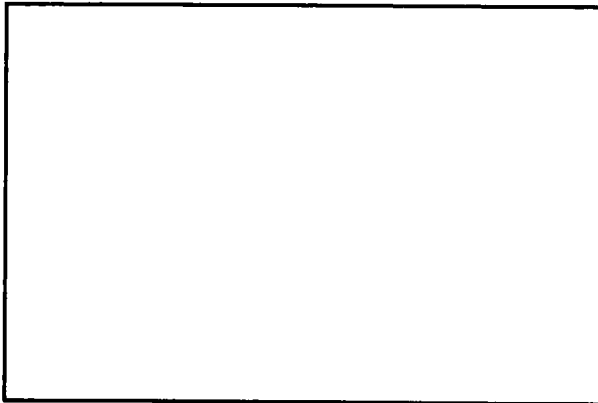


~~(TS//SI)~~ As for the U.S. situation, there were three stations, all located in the Philippines, which provided the overwhelming part of what little intercept coverage of the region existed. These sites were the Army's 9th USASA Field Station, [redacted]

[redacted] Clark Air Force Base, Philippines; the 6925th Radio Squadron, Mobile (RSM) at Clark Air Force Base (USA-57); and the U.S. Navy's intercept site at San Miguel (USN-27). Together, these sites provided about 450 daily hours of intercept coverage of DRV communications targets. However, the amount of coverage was small compared to the total amount of known and suspected activity. In fact, the coverage, which often amounted to mere "sampling," covered less than half of all potential DRV communications entities.⁸¹

EO 1.4.(c)

~~TOP SECRET//COMINT//X1~~



within South Vietnam itself and in adjacent Thailand. To cover the region, which included the two Vietnams, Laos, and Cambodia, NSA estimated that it needed another 105 intercept positions, or over 2,400 hours of daily coverage!⁸⁷ As the estimates were studied in Washington, Thailand grew in the minds of the cryptologic planners as the single answer to their problem. Yet, the Thailand solution would prove to be harder to implement than had been expected.

(S//SI)

EO 1.4.(c)

~~(S//SI)~~ **The First Beachhead in Asia: Establishing the SIGINT Site in [redacted] Thailand, [redacted] 1961**

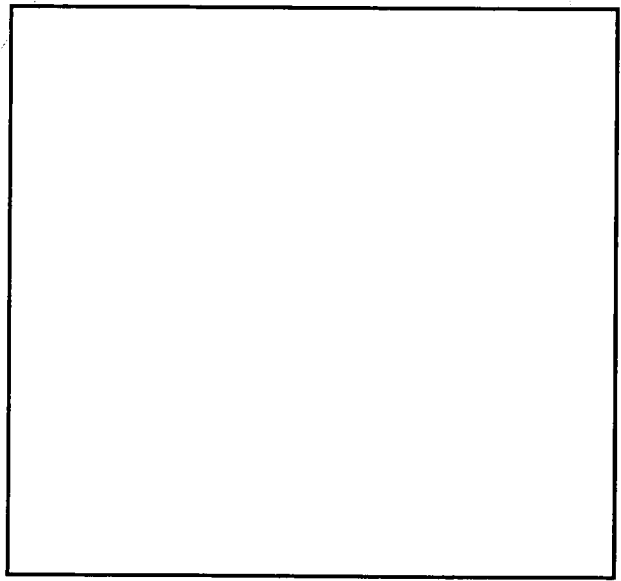
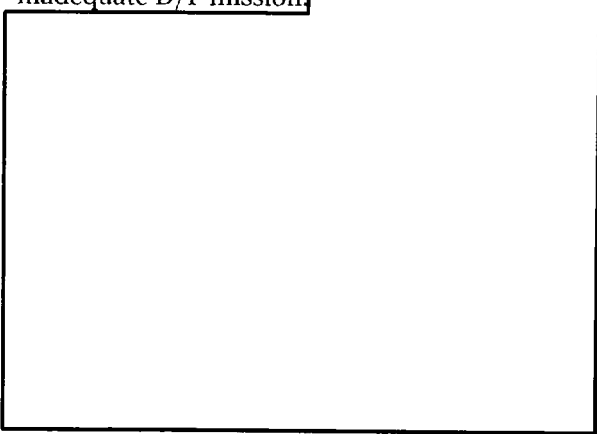
~~(S//SI)~~ The American hope for a mainland SIGINT site in Southeast Asia, specifically in South Vietnam, remained unfulfilled [redacted]

[redacted] The primary obstacle was the ceiling to U.S. personnel allowed into South Vietnam under the terms of the Geneva Accords. Besides that, there was Diem's barely submerged fear of the political consequences he would have to contend with in the face of an increased American presence in his country. So, American cryptologists had to look elsewhere for a site on mainland Southeast Asia. Their gaze turned to Thailand.

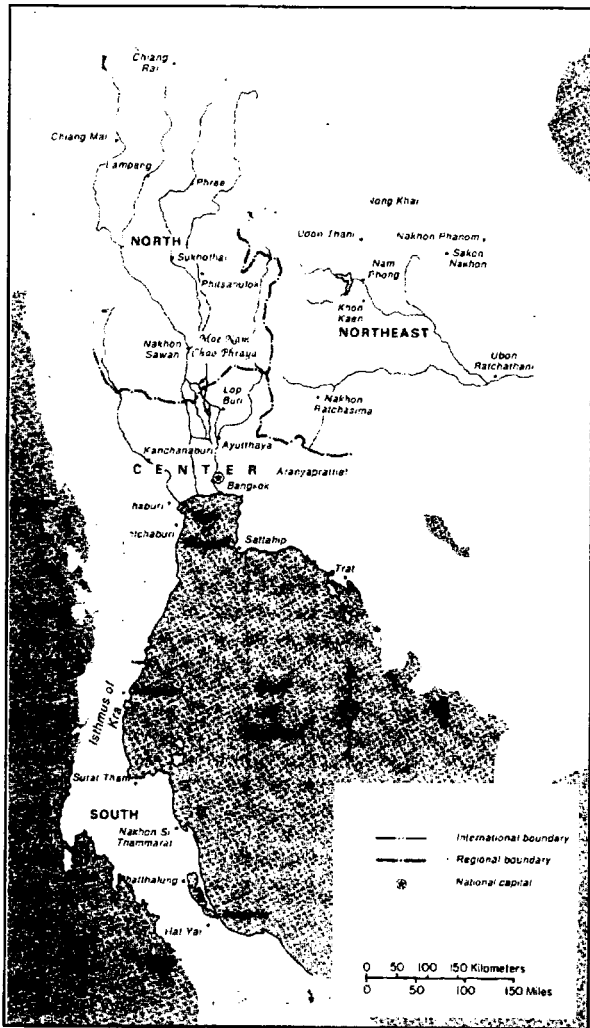
EO 1.4.(c)
EO 1.4.(d)

~~(TS//SI)~~ The more general traffic analytic situation was deemed barely sufficient to establish a "skeletal" technical continuity for radio station and network identification and provide data for a realistic estimate of the total communist communications problem.⁸⁴ Direction finding support on the DRV transmitters was considered "insignificant"; [redacted]

Special Identification Techniques (SIT), in this case radio fingerprinting (RFP) – a technique used to identify and catalogue radio operators and transmitters by their unique "fists" or operating peculiarities – which the ASA site at Clark AFB had used since it first took on the [redacted] was yielding little in the way of a usable library of identifications. This failure was traced to the inadequate D/F mission. [redacted]



~~(TS//SI)~~ The solution, as NSA saw it, was to establish intercept sources in the region, that is,



(U) Thailand

with the United States. Relations between Thailand and its immediate neighbors, Laos and Cambodia, traditionally were tense and involved historic claims over disputed border regions north along the Mekong River and Cambodia's western Batdambang and Siemreab Provinces. At the same time, Thailand's internal political situation was far from stable. A struggle for political supremacy between two contending Thai army generals, Thanarat Sarit and Phibunsongkram, led to a coup in 1957. In October 1958, Sarit, now in control, had instituted a crackdown on all political parties and critics [REDACTED]

(U) In May 1959, the Western-leaning Royal Laotian Government (RLG) had tried to wipe out the Pathet Lao movement. (See Chapter 3, pages 89-94, for more details on the Laotian situation [REDACTED])

Several Pathet Lao leaders, including Souphanouvong, the "Red Prince," were arrested and tossed in jail. One of two Pathet Lao combat battalions was surrounded. The other one escaped and headed north where it joined up with military units from the DRV sent by Hanoi to intervene. By July, the joint communist forces had driven RLG units from several outposts in Sam Neua (Xam Nua) Province. EO 1.4.(c)

[REDACTED]

(TS//SI) In light of the potential offered by the two sites, NSA planned for a big intercept mission in Thailand, looking to set up as many as fifty-two positions manned by 800 personnel. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

For their part, the Thai government remained skittish about identifying too closely

(TS) In response to the fighting in Laos, the United States developed an intervention plan, OPLAN 32-59, which called for the insertion of Marine ground forces and air support into Laos supported by a naval task force, Joint Task Force (JTF) 116, stationed in the Gulf of Siam. Along with this planning, the U.S. ambassador to Thailand, Alexis Johnson, approached Prime Minister Sarit. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Johnson agreed that any information that the unit obtained which was relevant to the security situation for Thailand would be

EO-1.4.(c)

passed to the government in Bangkok. Sarit agreed to the suggestion.⁹⁰

[Redacted]

~~(TS//SI)~~ The problem now for the United States was finding a cryptologic contingent to put into Thailand. Ironically, despite all of the previous planning for a site in Thailand, the ASA command was caught by surprise with the sudden change in the Thai attitude, and had no contingency plan for establishing any kind of mission there.

All of the site's intercept and technical analyses were to be forwarded to the Philippines for processing.⁹³

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

An offer by the AFSS to airlift a contingency mission of six vans and personnel was considered by the ASA and then dropped when the adverse impact on SIGINT support to the Pacific Air Force and Commander-in-Chief Pacific commands was evaluated.⁹² A similar offer of a Marine contingent was studied and then dropped, since the Marine landing force element of JTF 116 would have a more immediate need for it. Eventually, an ASA team was assembled scraping together personnel and equipment already stationed in the Philippines.

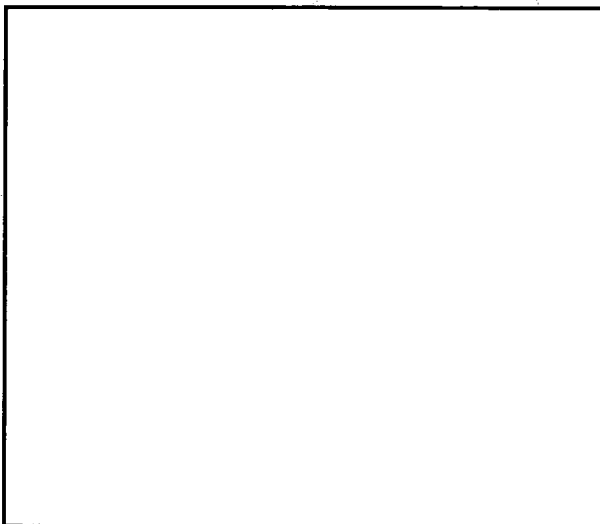
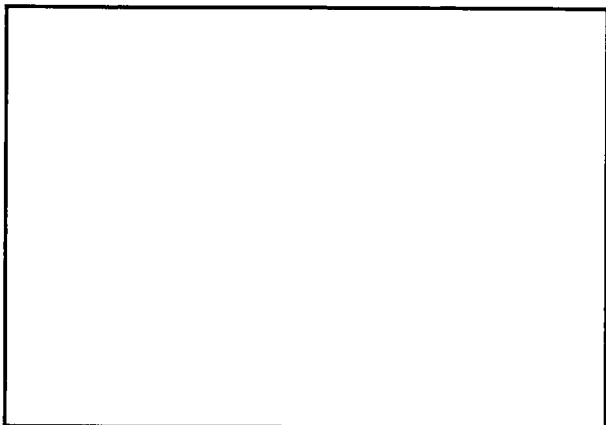
~~(TS)~~ However, the previous plans for the Thailand site [Redacted] were whittled down even more. A Thai-mandated ceiling of fifty personnel was placed on the SIGINT mission. With this restriction, the planned D/F capability for the Thailand site was scrapped. Any reporting function was eliminated as well.

[Redacted]

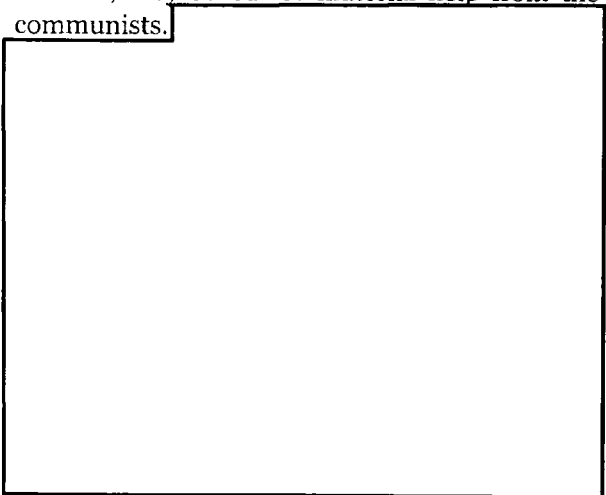
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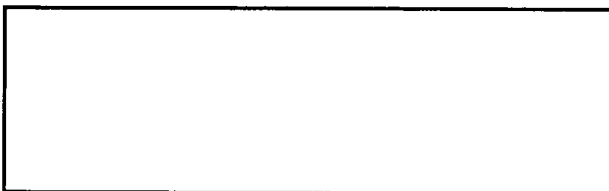
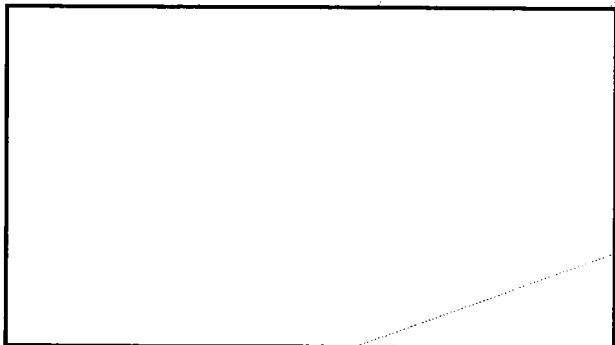
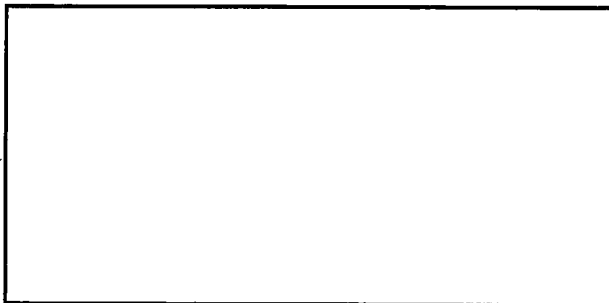
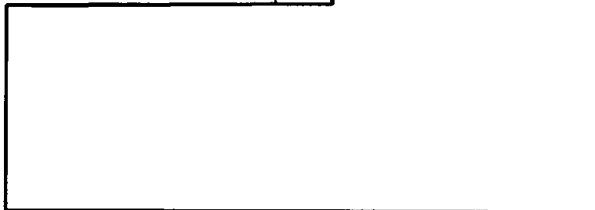


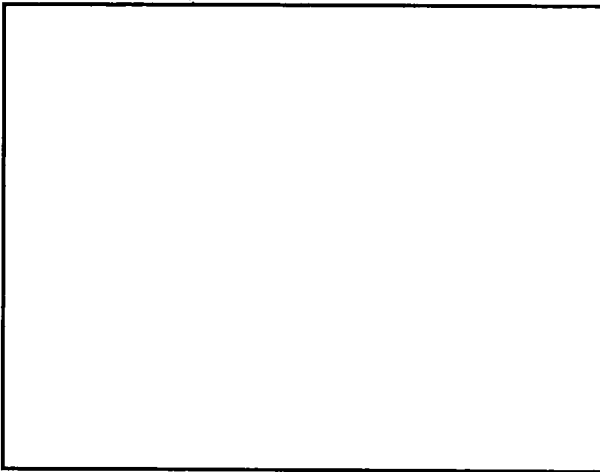
~~(TS//SI)~~ In the fall of 1960, Laos heated up again with the revolt of the RLC's paratroop battalion in Vientiane commanded by Captain Kong Le, a French-trained officer. There was more fighting between the forces of the neutralist Souvanna Phouma government and the American-backed General Phoumi. When Kong Le and Phoumi were ousted from Vientiane by Phoumi, they asked for material help from the communists.



~~(TS//SI)~~ However, the feared invasion of Laos never materialized. Laos calmed down. Concerned by the political instability of the region, the United States again approached the Thailand on the issue of a permanent station in their country. Much of the substance of the earlier December 1960 talks between Ambassador Johnson and Marshal Sarit was repeated in this latest version of the plan.

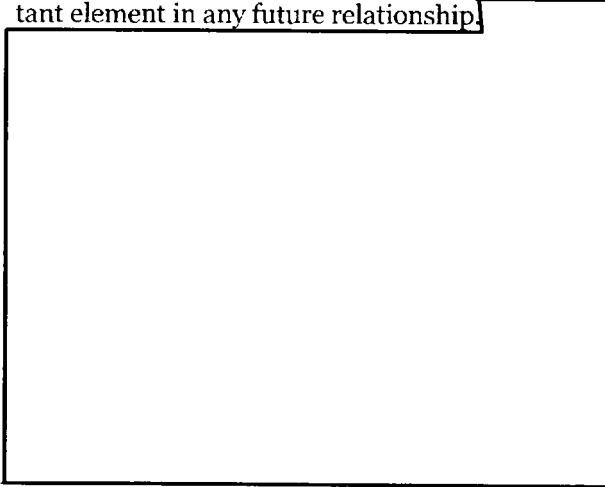
EO 1.4.(c)
EO 1.4.(d)





(U) Udorn site before construction started in 1965

~~(TS//SI)~~ The next few years proved difficult for the U.S. SIGINT mission in Thailand. The Thais were always sensitive to the political ramifications of a large American presence in their country and sought to keep it at a minimum. In future negotiations with the Thais, the U.S. cryptologic leadership usually deferred to the views of the U.S. ambassador in Bangkok, whose ability to sense what the Thais wanted was the most important element in any future relationship.

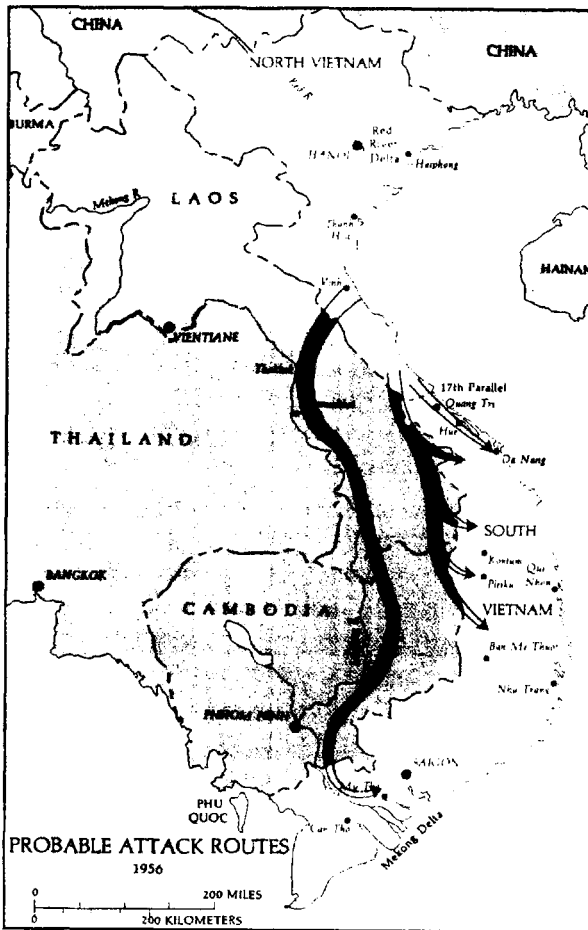


Thailand.¹⁰³ In fact, a permanent site in that country was not agreed upon until 1965, when Udorn (Udon Thani), located in the north central part of the country, which had served as a small intercept station for the fledgling AFSC, was picked as the major American SIGINT site in Thailand. Eventually, Udorn would become the only site in Southeast Asia after the American withdrawal from South Vietnam in 1973.

* * * *

(U) Ironically, despite the years of observing the growing threat from internal opposition sources and Viet Minh guerrillas, the USMAAG in Saigon remained convinced that the real threat to the Republic of Vietnam was by, cross-border attack from the DRV. In the mid-1950s, the then Commander USMAAG, Lieutenant General John O'Daniel, considered the main threat to South Vietnam to be a conventional force invasion from the north. In 1956, O'Daniel envisioned three possible attacks routes: across the seventeenth parallel with Hue and Tourane (Danang) the major targets, through Laos and east across the Central Highlands on the Kontum-Pleiku-Qui

~~(TS//SI)~~ The problem with the Thailand site was not in what it produced, but it what it could not provide: coverage of the growing insurgency inside South Vietnam and the current, tactical military situation in Laos. Additionally, there was little prospect for immediate and substantial growth, both in size and capabilities, especially in the all-critical D/F mission, of the field site in

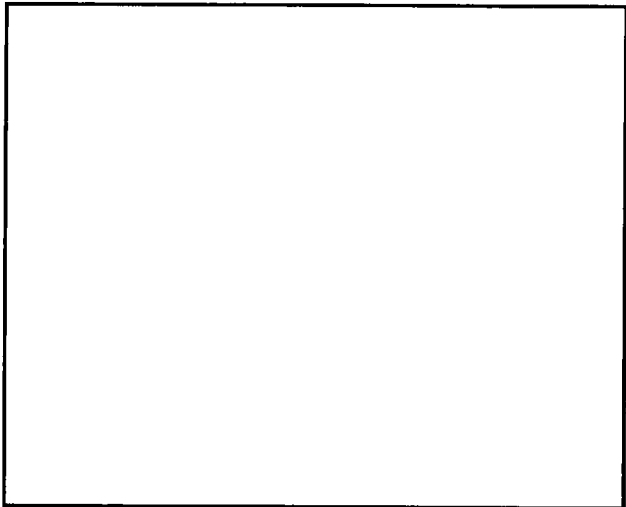


(U) Postulated invasion routes for a conventional invasion by the DRV in the mid-1950s

Nhon axis, and south through Cambodia along the Mekong River.¹⁰⁴

(U) If there was an invasion, General O'Daniel hoped that the Vietnamese forces could hold the line until SEATO forces would arrive.¹⁰⁵ To better meet this conventional threat, the U.S. sponsored a major reorganization of Saigon's army. Washington had been unhappy with the current Vietnamese army, which was seen as a territorial-based force composed of a ragtag mixture of inadequately armed so-called "light" and conventional units manned by poorly trained, exploited, and often demoralized troops – a residue from the days of the French administration, as some American advisors saw it.

(U) What General O'Daniel and others wanted was to turn the ARVN into a Western-style modern army: a logistics-rich (and dependent), mobile (but road-reliant) army manned by 150,000 "gung-ho" soldiers, which, coincidentally, was not unlike the U.S. Army at the time. The U.S. also wanted to organize a 40,000-man militia to take over internal security duties in the villages and provinces, freeing this new conventional ARVN to pursue guerrillas and defend South Vietnam's borders. The military threat from the resurgent guerrillas was minimized by O'Daniel and his successor, Lieutenant General Samuel Williams. Doctrinally, the U.S. Army downplayed unconventional warfare as was epitomized by the VC. The failure of communist guerrilla insurgencies in Greece and Philippines were well known to American military planners. However, the cause of guerrilla failures (or successes) and the basics of counterinsurgency programs were little understood outside of the U.S. Army's Special Forces. At worst, the MAAG dismissed the Vietnamese communist guerrilla attacks of the late 1950s as "diversions" from the "real" threat of a conventional invasion from the north.¹⁰⁶



(U) However, Hanoi would respond to the growing fighting in the south in its own fashion. In May 1959, the Lao Dong Party had promulgated its solution to the struggle in the Republic of Vietnam. Unlike the conventional invasion sce-

nario imagined by the Americans, the Vietnamese communists would not attack South Vietnam like a summer storm, erupting in a blast of armor, artillery, and divisions of well-armed, conventional troops; rather, the tempest stole in quietly, its first drops in the form of half-heard voices and thrush-like footfalls of small groups of men skirting along the feathery network of paths and *binh trams* known as the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

(U) Notes

1. (U) USIA/Office of Research and Intelligence Report: "Hanoi Radio and Refugees Give Factual Account of Uprising, Hanoi Acknowledges Effectiveness of Free World Reporting," 17-56, November 29, 1956.

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3. (U) ASA Diplomatic Translation, SIS #139033, 17 August 1944, Dalat to Vichy, RG 457.

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- 5. (U) Spector, 233.
- 6. (U) Schulzinger, 79.
- 7. (U) Ibid., 83-84.
- 8. (U) Ibid., 82.
- 9. (U) Ibid., 81.
- 10. (U) Schulzinger, 81; Olson and Roberts, 61-62.
- 11. (U) Frances Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake* (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1972), 108.
- 12. (U) Olson and Roberts, 62-63.
- 13. (U) Spector, 326.
- 14. (U) Olson and Roberts, 66.

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17. (U) Kahin, George McTurnan, and John W. Lewis, *The United States in Vietnam* (Revised Edition) (New York: the Dial Press, 1969), 100.

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20. Kahin and Lewis, 102.

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24. (U) Olson and Roberts, 63.

25. (U) James William Gibson, *The Perfect War: The War We Couldn't Lose and How We Did It* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988), 71.

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27. ~~(TS//SI)~~ Ibid.

28. (U) Schulzinger, 91.

29. (U) Kahin and Lewis, 109.

30. (U) Spector, 313.

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32. (U) Spector, 315.

33. (U) Ibid., 325.

34. (U) Ibid., 331.

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36. ~~(TS//SI)~~ Ibid.

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38. (U) Spector, 334.

39. (U) Spector, 342.

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42. (U) John Prados, *The Blood Road: The Ho Chi Minh Trail and the Vietnam War* (New York: John Wiley and Sons Inc., 1999), 31.

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45. ~~(TS//SI)~~ Ibid.

46. (U) Spector, 364; also see *Special Issue of Studies in Intelligence*, 24, cited below.

47. (U) Ibid., 368.

48. (U) Ibid., 369.

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50. (U) Spector, 370.

51. (U) Karnow, 236-237.

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

55. ~~(TS//SI)~~ Ibid.

[Redacted]

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[Redacted]

58. (TS//SI) Ibid.

[Redacted]

62. (TS//SI) Ibid.

[Redacted]

66. (TS//SI) Ibid.

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73. (TS//SI) Ibid.

74. (U) Marilyn B. Young, *The Vietnam Wars, 1945-1990* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1991), 69.

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76. (TS//SI//NF) William D. Gerhard, *In the Shadow of War: To the Gulf of Tonkin*, Cryptologic History Series, National Security Agency, June 1969, 14.

77. (TS//SI//NF) Gerhard, 16.

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79. (TS//SI//NF) Ibid., 4.

80. (TS//SI//NF) Ibid., 4.

81. (TS//SI//NF) Ibid., 2.

82. (TS//SI) "Report of TDY Trip of David W. Gaddy, ACOM-6 to the Far East," March 1960, CCH series XII.NN.IV.A.2.

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EO 1.4.(d)

83. (TS//SI//NF) Technical Survey.

84. (TS//SI//NF) Ibid., 2.

85. (TS//SI//NF) Ibid.

86. (TS//SI//NF) Ibid.

87. (TS//SI//NF) Ibid., 26.

88. (TS//SI//NF) Gerhard, 18.

89. (TS//SI//NF) Ibid.

90. (TS) Bangkok to Washington, No. 530, September 1, 1500 1959; NCA ACC# 33281, "Miscellaneous Thailand Correspondence."

91. (TS//SI) NSAPAC 290440Z August 1959, AGI 33372. NCA ACC# 33281.

92. (TS//SI) Ibid.

93. (TS//SI) DIRNSA, 171600Z September 1959, AGO 09045/17, NCA ACC# 33281.

94. (TS//SI) NSAPAC HAW to DIRNSA, 090030Z December 1959, NCA ACC# 33281.

95. (TS//SI) DIRNSA to NSAPAC HAW, 151910Z December 1959, 12119/15.

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97. (TS//SI//NF) Gerhard, 20.

98. (TS//SI//NF) Ibid., 21.

99. (TS//SI//NF) Thomas R. Johnson, *American Cryptology during the Cold War, 1945-1989; Book II: Centralization Wins, 1960-1972*, Center for Cryptologic History, 1995, 512.

100. (TS//SI//NF) Gerhard, 23.

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102. (TS//SI) DIRNSA, 032240Z December 1963, 12236/03, NCA ACC# 46190.

103. (TS//SI//NF) Gerhard, 23.

104. (U) In a final irony, these three projected invasion routes would be used by the PAVN during its large-scale, conventional invasions of South Vietnam in 1972 (which failed) and 1975.

105. (U) Spector, 268.

106. (U) Ibid., 273.

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