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# VIETNAM: THE BROADENING WAR

WESLEY R. FISHEL

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The Year of the Snake—1965—was one of vast enlargement and intensification of the conflict in South Vietnam. From a small guerrilla war, fought principally between Vietnamese of various political colorations, it was expanded to ever-greater dimensions and increasingly serious international implications. By the end of 1965 it had become a vital political issue in the domestic politics of the United States, and an issue which threatened to divide both the Free and the Communist Worlds.

Secretary of State Dean Rusk told a national television audience on January 3, 1965, that he shared with them “a sense of frustration that things are not somehow moving more rapidly toward a conclusion” in the long campaign in Vietnam. He added:

It is going to require persistence, it is going to require a good deal of effort by the South Vietnamese, as well as ourselves, and a certain coolness in dealing with this problem, rather than taking reckless action which would move us over thoughtlessly in either the direction of defeat or in the direction of a very great catastrophe.<sup>1</sup>

Pulling American forces out of South Vietnam, said the Secretary, would only encourage a militantly expansionist Communist China to push on further aggression leading toward a major catastrophe. Expansion of the war, on the other hand, would multiply casualties by the thousands, subject Asians to devastation and lead down a trail “the end of which no one in any country could possibly see with assurance.” He then offered the opinion that the South Vietnamese can defeat the Viet Cong guerrillas “if they can obtain the unity and the assistance that is needed for that purpose . . . the basic problem is in the effort of the South Vietnamese, with our large assistance.” But equally important, he observed, steps would have to be taken to ensure that infiltration from Communist North Vietnam was stopped.

As the year 1965 drew to a close, the Secretary of State’s admonitions took on new significance. Whereas at the start of the year American troop strength (including advisory personnel) had reached the 20,000 level, by mid-December it had been augmented to 180,000, and expectations were that another year would see its rise to as many as 400,000. The violence of 1964 was intensified during 1965 to a degree which changed the entire

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<sup>1</sup> Reported in *The Washington Post*, January 4, 1965.

character of the war, and brought into sharp focus the questions Mr. Rusk had raised a year earlier.

The new year began inauspiciously in South Vietnam. Apart from the military prospects, which at that moment were grim and depressing, the political situation gave little reason for optimism. The civilian government of Phan Khac Suu and Tran Van Huong, which had been grudgingly installed in office by the civilian High National Council with the approval of the Military Revolutionary Council at the end of October 1964, had been badly shaken late in December by the dissolution of the High National Council by the "Young Turk" generals and the concurrent military arrest of eight Councillors. Buddhist dissatisfaction with the "unrepresentativeness" of the Suu-Huong administration also threatened to erupt in public unpleasantness. And the American representatives in Saigon were at a loss to know which way to turn. The confusion was neatly epitomized by a *New York Times* correspondent in the following terms:

The military oppose the politicians and the Americans but support Premier Huong. The Buddhists denounce the Premier and hint dissatisfaction with the Americans. Huong is fed up with the Buddhists and wants to work with the Americans but does not want to alienate the military. The Americans want to work with everyone according to rules that no one seems to appreciate except the Americans.<sup>2</sup>

Since the High National Council had been established to work out a formula for convening a representative national assembly, its abrupt end left the regime without even a facsimile of a legislative branch. The apparently crumbling political structure, however, was able after many days of internal squabbling and dissension to muster enough military support to withstand threatened Buddhist agitation and total collapse. Premier Huong reached an understanding with the military commander-in-chief, Lt. Gen. Nguyen Khanh, and his younger colleagues, under which they acknowledged the supreme authority of the civilian government, and Huong in return agreed to bring military leaders into a reshuffled cabinet. Within days after this compromise arrangement had been worked out, the military leaders, under the direction of Gen. Khanh, mounted another *coup d'etat*, and restored the Republic to military rule.

The *coup* was generally viewed as a blow to the prestige of the United States, though ironically enough it demonstrated the falseness of repetitious Communist charges that the leaders of South Vietnam are only the "puppets" and "lackeys" of the United States. American support had been given the Suu-Huong effort in the hope that it would result in a stable civilian government. The *coup*, carried out in the face of American warnings that such an act might result in a curtailment of American aid and an "agonizing reappraisal" of the entire American commitment to the Viet-

<sup>2</sup> *New York Times*, January 10, 1965.

name, resulted finally only in a mild, almost casual official American reaction. Although encouraged by subsequent events to hope that at least a facade of continuing civilian government would be maintained in Saigon, the Administration in Washington appeared to have concluded that it would have to accept a period of governmental and political instability as an inevitable occurrence in an emerging nation struggling to preserve its integrity in the midst of a bitter internecine conflict.

The wisdom of resignation to the unescapable seemed borne out when, on February 19, 1965, just three days after a "doctors' cabinet" headed by Dr. Phan Huy Quat had taken office in Saigon, a revolt among the military jolted the Military Revolutionary Council. The Quat government, composed mainly of civilians (six of them medical men), but including two Army generals and an Air Force Lieutenant colonel, was also made up principally of nominal Buddhists, while including also four Roman Catholics (among them Maj. Gen. Nguyen Van Thieu), one Cao Dai, and one Hoa Hao. Premier Quat stated that his chief objective would be "to bring about unity among all the religions" of South Vietnam. But perhaps most salient among the identifying facts of this new regime was their known opposition to the government of the late President Ngo Dinh Diem. For the new Premier and many of his ministers had been members of the group of oppositionists who had met at the Caravelle Hotel in April 1960 to draft a petition asking Diem to institute reforms in his administration. The coup of February 19 was led by Brig. Gen. Lam Van Phat and Col. Pham Ngoc Thao, both Roman Catholics. Its duration was roughly twenty-four hours, and with its collapse came the ousting of Gen. Khanh as chief of the armed forces. Apparently coincidental in timing, the latter event was of major significance in the efforts of Vietnam's military leaders to reduce the turmoil that had afflicted the Republic's politics and hampered the prosecution of the war against the Viet Cong. On February 22, Gen. Khanh, whom journalists had considered a "strongman," submitted his resignation to the Armed Forces Council by telephone, and by the beginning of March he had flown to New York, where he was to assume a new sinecure as Vietnam's Observer at the United Nations.

The February *coup* attempt, while it altered the composition of the military leadership, left the Quat government intact and still in charge of civil administration. This, however, was a progressively smaller responsibility in many ways, for even as the Saigon administration began reorganizing its departments and attempting to clear away some of the bureaucratic deadwood which had hindered efficient government over the years since independence, its zone of effective action was being whittled away by Communist military and political advances. By February 1965, the outlook for avoiding a Communist military victory in South Vietnam was bleak. Not only were casualties mounting, but the preoccupation of ranking military commanders with their current position in the power hierarchy and their consequent involvement in political maneuvers cut deeply into army morale

and military effectiveness. Furthermore, a war-weary population was being systematically terrorized to the point that fear and defeatism were beginning to spread dangerously. It was at this low point that, on February 7, Communist guerrillas attacked an American compound at Pleiku, in the Vietnamese highlands, killing eight and wounding 126 soldiers, and damaging a number of aircraft. Stung to retaliation, South Vietnamese air force planes, accompanied by U.S. jet fighters, bombed and strafed a military communications center in North Vietnam just beyond the 17th parallel. The raid on Vinh Linh was followed by other raids on clearly military objectives in the Communist half of Vietnam, and although there was no reliable evidence that the bombings had seriously damaged morale in North Vietnam, there were obvious indications that morale in the South had been given a healthy boost. Like the raids of August 1964, these were offensive acts, for they were reactive in origin, and the attacks on the North gave South Vietnamese a feeling that their forces and those of the United States were not merely fighting delaying actions, which ultimately could result only in a negotiated defeat.

The casualties suffered at Pleiku brought to 376 the number of Americans killed in South Vietnam since January 1, 1961, of whom 262 had been killed in combat with the Viet Cong.<sup>3</sup> In the months that followed, American advisors were joined by rapidly growing numbers of American combat troops, in consequence of a Washington decision to turn the tide of the war militarily as far as might be possible through a multiplication of American troops strength and the commitment of Americans to active combat alongside the South Vietnamese. By mid-December, U.S. strength had reached 180,000, of whom more than 40,000 were marines. But Viet Cong strength also was increased, as the Communist government in Hanoi supplemented its units in the South by infiltrating an estimated 12 regular army regiments into the territory of the Saigon government. And American casualties likewise reflected the sudden escalation of the war: in early December, the Defense Department reported that American dead in Vietnam totaled 1,861, of whom 1,432 were combat deaths. The total number wounded rose to 6,496. And by the same token, the cost of fighting the war in Vietnam increased sharply. In addition to approximately \$1 billion spent in 1965 for economic aid, surplus food shipments, and direct military support for the Vietnamese armed forces (in the form of equipment and weapons), unclassified information indicated that the direct cost of fighting the war with American arms and men was running at the rate of about \$6 billion annually as of December 1965—i.e., about \$16.5 million daily.

The impact of the intensified American involvement was felt throughout Vietnam. Apart from the obvious implications to the Communists in the North and to their allies in Peking and Moscow, there were sheer physical

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<sup>3</sup> In 1964, 136 Americans were killed in combat in South Vietnam, 1,022 were wounded, and 11 were listed as missing.

effects in South Vietnam as well. The presence of such large numbers of American servicemen meant a sudden inflationary stimulus to the Vietnamese economy. It was coincident with a drastic fall in rice deliveries that resulted from a methodical Viet Cong campaign to cut roads, canals, and other transport arteries and thus prevent peasants and millers from engaging in their normal commercial undertakings while simultaneously tightening an economic "noose" around urban centers dependent for their foodstuffs on these deliveries. To reduce inflationary pressures, the United States in September switched servicemen's pay in Vietnam from "green dollars" to Military Payment Certificates (scrip), thus removing from the cash markets one source of difficulty. To deal with the dilemmas of good crops and food shortages, the Vietnamese and American governments instituted a combination air and sea lift which carried periodic shipments of foodstuffs and other market items from Saigon and foreign ports to other Vietnamese coastal towns and cities, and to population centers in the interior. Admittedly, this forced feeding had an artificial quality about it, and could be sustained only at great expense and with much difficulty.

Larger armed forces also required heavier logistical support. Thus, whereas the Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) that had worked with Vietnamese units since 1954 had been able to operate effectively from small installations paralleling larger ones of the Vietnamese, it now became necessary to build an independent base of support for American forces which, as part of the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), were expected to number as many as 400,000, if the war in Vietnam lasted through 1966. The sites chosen for the required installations were initially in the Saigon area, for Saigon was the only port for ocean-going vessels.<sup>4</sup> Shipping delays at Saigon, added to a glut in men, weapons, and supplies, caused an immediate realization that additional facilities were urgently needed. Three major jet air bases (Tan Son Nhut at Saigon, Bien Hoa, and Da Nang), plus 175 additional lesser bases and landing strips, were developed to facilitate air shipment. To improve maritime facilities, the United States chose Cam Ranh Bay, often described as the best natural harbor in Southeast Asia, for a huge port complex with industrial development planned nearby. All told, some 30 major construction projects, ranging from Quang Tri in the extreme north of the Republic to the island of Phu Quoc off the southwest coast, are currently under way. The net effect of this logistic construction program has been to improve, slowly but steadily, American ability to deliver necessary machinery and supplies to U.S. and Vietnamese forces, and to fill with considerable success the civilian supply gap resulting from Communist military activity. At the same time, the construction work is being undertaken with the important cooperation of tens of thousands of Vietnamese skilled and semi-skilled laborers, thus

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<sup>4</sup> "The logistics base here, as one high-ranking officer put it, was not much more than a navy commissary and a supply room." Hanson Baldwin, in *The New York Times*, November 28, 1965.

draining from an already tight labor market men whose talents are required in any of several locations simultaneously, and driving wage rates consistently higher.

An additional problem of some magnitude developed with the concurrent intensification of Viet Cong and North Vietnamese military activity, and American and South Vietnamese use of artillery shelling and air bombing in the Central Vietnamese provinces. In the wake of the war, tens of thousands of Vietnamese streamed out of distant villages and isolated farmsteads to seek shelter and aid in towns and cities controlled by the Saigon government. While it was not always possible to determine accurately which had been the primary factor in their flight, it was certain that these refugees, who by late fall numbered more than 700,000, preferred life in the mean conditions of a refugee center near the coast to remaining in their native villages. These people posed a challenge to the Vietnamese government, perhaps equal in political importance to that offered by the influx of 860,000 refugees from North Vietnam during the 300 days following the Geneva accords in July 1954. Left to fend for themselves or given inadequate assistance, they constituted a potential danger to the internal security of the Republic; given security, and assisted to find adequate and satisfactory land and means of sustenance, they could form a major unit of popular support for the government.

Support for the Saigon regime varied in 1965, as previously, according to the time, the place, the situation, and the nature of the particular population involved. With the upsurge in U.S. military power in South Vietnam, and the intensification of the air war against the Viet Cong and North Vietnam, came a gradual easing of tension in the South and an evident improvement in popular morale. On May 6, the Armed Forces Council turned over "full control of the nation" to the civil government of Phan Huy Quat. To demonstrate their goodwill and sincerity, the Council announced they were bowing out of politics altogether, and Maj. Gen. Nguyen Van Thieu, who was not only Secretary General of the Council but Minister of Defense in Dr. Quat's government, stepped down from the latter position. The Council's statement said:

As the war becomes more decisive, the military leaders must concentrate all their efforts toward its prosecution. They cannot continue to carry out political tasks forced upon them in the past.<sup>5</sup>

Formed in September 1964 at the urging of younger generals who had supported Gen. Khanh in the attempted *coup* of that month, it operated primarily to maintain a balance of power among the senior officers in the armed forces and to prevent a single officer, such as Khanh, from manipulating the armed services for his own political gain. The apparent stability of the Quat regime, and the interference of their political activity with the

<sup>5</sup> *The Washington Post*, May 7, 1965.



war effort, had for many months disturbed these officers, who recognized that this situation was in a measure responsible for the military deterioration, and that, further, they were increasingly the object of criticism and even derision by religious and other segments of the population for neglecting their primary functions.

May also saw the holding of local elections in those provinces and districts controlled, at least part of the time, by the central government. Of the 4.5 million registered voters, approximately 3.5 million (73%) went to the polls, despite Communist attempts to sabotage the voting. The Viet Cong kidnapped ten voters, fired on a voting booth, shot one woman voter, and murdered a candidate; but the elections were considered a great success, and there is little question but that they suggested a greater degree of authority in the countryside than was generally believed to exist prior to that time. Governmental authority was of surprising resiliency to many observers in light of the enormous number of local government officials who had been killed or kidnapped since 1959. During the nine-month period, January-September 1965, alone, 1100 such men were eliminated by the Viet Cong.<sup>6</sup> That civil officials were a prime target for Communist terrorism, was of course well known, and as time goes on it becomes steadily more difficult to assure adequately trained replacements for those who have been Viet Cong victims.

On June 11, 1965, the Quat government resigned, and military leaders in Saigon organized a "war cabinet" under Brig. Gen. Nguyen Cao Ky as Prime Minister. In many respects the "front man" for the military chiefs, Ky, 36-year old commander of the Vietnamese Air Force, had a reputation for enjoying the cafes and boulevards of Saigon when he was not training or leading his fellow pilots. A dashing figure whose political experience was non-existent outside the backrooms of the military headquarters, he has distinguished himself in his six months in office primarily by having lasted that long, and thus provided a small measure of stability to the rocky political landscape. He is not a dictator, but rather chief spokesman for the nine-man national leadership committee of the senior generals. In many respects he is overshadowed by the charismatic and ambitious Brig. Gen. Nguyen Chanh Thi, Commander of I Corps, in the Da Nang-Hue area, who is considered by many observers to be the likely eventual successor to Ky. In any event, the cohesive power of the armed forces will undoubtedly continue to be the stiff spine of whatever regime is organized in Saigon for the foreseeable future, since the civilian politicians have thus far shown themselves incapable of uniting behind an individual leader or program and leading the country effectively through this period of war.

After twenty years of almost continuous warfare, the people of South Vietnam manifest considerable weariness, which has not been eased by the

<sup>6</sup> *Public Administration Bulletin*, Public Administration Division, USOM/Saigon, No. 25, Nov. 2, 1965.



systematic Viet Cong terrorization of the population, the frightful presence and impacts of the weapons of modern warfare, and the steady attrition of generations of leadership. The Diem government, for all its promising beginnings, had in the last analysis failed to meet the requirements of its time, and the almost chaotic turbulence which has followed upon its overthrow has rendered even more acute the problems which a nation experiences in time of war. Yet thus far the attitudes of the articulate portion of the population—the educated, the professional and business groups, the military, have remained fundamentally anti-Communist and tenaciously resilient. Desertions from the Vietnamese armed forces (National Army, regional and local forces) have been staggeringly high over the years, by Western standards, and have risen steadily since 1962: in 1962 they averaged roughly 2,500 per month, in 1963 the average rose slightly to approximately 3,000 monthly, in 1964 the number rose sharply to 6,000 per month, and in 1965 it continued to rise, reaching a probable average of over 8,000 monthly. Yet the evidence adduced by American military observers is that few of these men *defect*—i.e., to the Communists. Rather, the Vietnamese Army, like many non-modern forces, suffers from antiquated and inequitable systems of recruitment, pay, furlough, discharge, retirement, and death benefit. If to this is added the fact that many soldiers in the Saigon government's army and regional or local forces have been fighting for as long as 20 years under this system, desertion for the reasons usually given: to visit home, family, help with the harvest, have a rest, escape discipline, or general weariness, is understandable. Morale has been erratic, varying according to the unit and the situation, and leadership has been of varying quality. Yet the Army takes losses of staggering character, but continues to fight, and with reportedly improving effectiveness.

The Viet Cong, by contrast, impress these same observers as having generally strong dedication and better morale than government troops. Well indoctrinated and well led, armed with late model Communist bloc weapons, and stiffened by a Northern "backbone" of 40,000 regulars, Communist troops have fought well, not only against war-weary South Vietnamese soldiers, but against American Army and Marine units as well. However, Viet Cong defections have risen sharply. Of an estimated total strength in late 1965 of approximately 100,000 regulars and as many more irregulars, between February 21 and September 11, 1965, 5,238 military defectors were reported registered in Vietnamese *chieu hoi* camps established for their reception and rehabilitation. There were in addition a reported 25,680 non-military defectors from the Viet Cong<sup>7</sup> during the same period.

Of vital concern to the Vietnamese is the presence and attitude of the United States. As their territorially distant but humanly present great ally, the United States is the *sine qua non* of South Vietnam's continued exist-

<sup>7</sup> As used here, a defector is someone having a clear connection with the Viet Cong—either a soldier, political cadre, agitprop personnel, informer, bearer, messenger, or agent.

ence. As it has become increasingly committed to the struggle in Vietnam, the growing American presence has become a mixed blessing to the people of that country. Without American assistance, the Vietnamese could not physically preserve their independence and territorial integrity. Yet the very dimensions of American participation have become so great as to make it extremely difficult for the allies to preserve the reality of the concept that this is a Vietnamese rather than an American war, especially when it comes into conflict with the realities of Great Power politics, in which Vietnam has become a hapless pawn. The search for an end to the conflict, and its replacement by the constructive instruments of development, both engages and concerns the South Vietnamese and the Americans. The simultaneous offer by President Johnson on April 7 to hold "unconditional discussions" with the Communists and to help underwrite a bold program for the economic and social development of continental Southeast Asia, was the first non-military initiative of major scope to come from either side in the war. As a further manifest of goodwill, the United States appropriated funds to enable the implementation of feasible initial portions of that development program. None of these, however, was actually inside South Vietnam, and it was understood that any measures for that country would have to await the coming of the peace.

The question of how and when to terminate the hostilities continued to engage the attention and the efforts of Americans, Vietnamese, and others as well. Hanoi and Peking's position had been clearly stated by Premier Phan Van Dong of North Vietnam in a report to the National Assembly in Hanoi on April 12, 1965:

1. Recognition of the basic national rights of the Vietnam people: Peace, independence, sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity.
2. Pending peaceful reunification of Vietnam, while Vietnam is still temporarily divided into two zones, the military provisions of the 1954 Geneva agreements on Vietnam must be strictly respected; the two zones must refrain from joining any military alliance with foreign countries, there must be no foreign military bases, troops and military personnel in their respective territory.
3. The internal affairs of South Vietnam must be settled by the South Vietnamese people themselves, in accordance with the program of the South Vietnam National Front for Liberation, without any foreign interference.
4. The peaceful reunification of Vietnam is to be settled by the Vietnamese people in both zones, without any foreign interference.<sup>8</sup>

In elaborating on the meaning of these points, Pham Van Dong stated that all U.S. troops would have to be withdrawn from South Vietnam, and in later statements both he and President Ho Chi Minh emphasized that this withdrawal would have to precede any negotiations. The North Vietnamese

<sup>8</sup> *Washington Post*, April 14, 1965.

leaders also explicitly ruled out United Nations intervention as “inappropriate.”<sup>9</sup> Although much discussion has occurred in respect of possible negotiations leading to eventual termination of the Vietnamese hostilities, and several initiatives have been launched by General de Gaulle, Prime Minister Wilson of Great Britain, and the Chiefs of State and Heads of Government of Seventeen Non-Aligned Nations,<sup>10</sup> among many which could be cited, no evidence has yet appeared to persuade responsible non-Communist statesmen that these stipulations by Hanoi have yet been modified, or that the North Vietnamese regime is yet prepared to discuss possible termination on any other basis.

On the other hand, the American position, while avowedly based on “unconditional discussions,” is premised on a stipulation that the end results of negotiations must include a guarantee of the independence and territorial integrity of South Vietnam. Beyond that, however, the United States is willing to *discuss* any of the terms offered by Hanoi, but will not *agree in advance* to the four stipulations of Pham Van Dong on the premise that these are points to be discussed, not situations to be settled prior to discussions. As the year came to an end, there seemed little possibility that either adversary would soon be willing to meet the other on middle ground.

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<sup>9</sup> See, for example, the letter from President Ho to Dr. Linus Pauling, cited in *The New York Times*, November 24, 1965; and see the same paper, December 2, 1965, for a report on negative reactions from North Vietnam for “recent indirect soundings” by Secretary General U Thant.

<sup>10</sup> See *Recent Exchanges Concerning Attempts to Promote a Negotiated Settlement of the Conflict in Viet-Nam* (Viet-Nam No. 3 [1965], London, Cmnd. 2756, August 1965).

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