PREFACE

In the past two years I have spent many hours discussing Vietnam with Vu Van Thai. There is no one whom I have found more stimulating, and only a handful of individuals, mostly Vietnamese, whom I have found at all comparably experienced, perceptive and persuasive.

Going over my notepads of the last two years, I found that I had taken extensive notes on our many conversations, some at the time and others immediately afterward, mostly in outline form but generally preserving Thai's own wording and formulation. Each conversation touched on many subjects, and none, of course, was as structured as an interview; they were, indeed, dialogues, of which only one half has been transcribed. I have now sorted out and collected my notes on these conversations by general subject and sub-heading, fleshed them out slightly where I am confident of my memory, and indicated, in brackets, the question to which Thai's comments were addressed. (In many cases, he was actually responding to a comment by me, not transcribed, rather than to a direct question). I have also included, in brackets, a few comments by me, some of them from our conversation and others added when I wrote the notes. For the benefit particularly of those at RAND working on "Lessons of Vietnam" and related subjects, I am issuing these notes now in three documents:

D-19127-ARPA/AGILE - "Vu Van Thai on U.S. Aims and Intervention in Vietnam"

D-19128-ARPA/AGILE - "U.S. Support of Diem: Comments by Vu Van Thai"

D-19136-ARPA/AGILE - "Vu Van Thai on Pacification"

Readers who find these relevant to their work should also be interested in similar D's based on conversations with Hoang Van Chi (D-19134-ARPA/AGILE, "Communists and Vietnamese" and D-19135-ARPA/AGILE, "Confucians and Communists"), and in other D's by me that reflect, in particular, my talks with Thai and Chi (e.g., D-19863-ARPA/AGILE, "U.S. Aims and Leverage in Vietnam, 1950-65" and D-19129-ARPA/AGILE, "U.S. Policy and

the Politics of Others." They should also see Thai's RM-5997-ARPA, Fighting and Negotiating in Vietnam: A Strategy."

It is my hope that Thai himself, when he returns to this country from economic consultation work in Africa for the UN, will be moved by my Boswellian labor to use these notes as starting points for more elaborated pieces of his own on these subjects. (Until he has a chance to see them, they should not be shown outside RAND.)

For those readers unfamiliar with Thai's background: from 1950-54, Thai was a non-communist member of the Central Committee of France of the Lien Viet (earlier, and still more commonly known as the Viet Minh). After the Geneva negotiations of 1954 (which he attended), he joined the Diem government in Saigon and became Director of Budget and Foreign Aid until he submitted his resignation in October 1960 (not accepted till late in 1961, when he joined the United Nations). He has been a part-time consultant to The Rand Corporation since 1967, and is principally occupied at present as consultant to the Administrator of the UN Development Program.

U.S. SUPPORT OF DIEM: COMMENTS BY VU VAN THAI

Like most others, Thai had been surprised that we managed, in Geneva and after, to get rid of the French without losing entirely the option for a non-communist outcome. However, we proceeded to make some early mistakes. Among these were:

1. We should have insisted that Diem observe the Geneva Accords in 1956 (i.e., in taking part in discussions with North Vietnam). Neither Diem nor the DRV was ready for elections in 1956-1957; a competition would have been good for both of them. The GVN should have said it wanted elections, but "under meaningful conditions." This would have led to a long period of negotiations; Diem's focus of attention would have had to shift immediately, in desirable ways.

2. Where communists have already a strong appeal to a non-negligible segment of the population, as in South Vietnam, we should have been for tolerance, humaneness, not strict anti-communism. The Communist Party in Vietnam is more comparable to the Parties of France, Italy, etc., than to those of Malaya, Philippines: i.e., it is deep-rooted, broad (though a minority). After 1946 (though not, perhaps, before August 1945) the aim of eradicating communists from Vietnam was an infeasible one. The aim should have been to squeeze and transform them toward a more peaceful, evolutionary strategy. [But it was not through "bad luck" or inadvertence we made these errors; we did what we were likely to do, if not certain.]

But the fear of losing to communists plus fear of interfering with the GVN led to (1) unwillingness to take risks of instability and chaos in a fluid situation, even when risks were necessary in order to upset, productively, the existing order; (2) hence, we relied like the French on a regime largely created by the French: one unable to use the energy of popular aspirations in support of struggle against the communists.

"Our propaganda was self-defeating: for when Diem, and then the generals, spoke of freedom, it added insult to injury."

("For their part, the communists should have focussed on the limitations of the Diem regime instead of on the Americans.")

The Requirements of "Containment"

[Was the Diem regime really worse than other SEA regimes?] "No. But the Vietnamese public had been politicized by anti-colonial leaders: not just the communists, but Phan Boi, etc., in the '30's..." And its opponent, after 1954, was a highly-experienced Communist Party with the prestige of victory over the French.

After 1955, even to contain the communists, at sustainable cost, one needed every approach; everything needed to be improved, made more favorable; in particular, all Vietnamese non-communist resources were needed.

Improvement was essential in:

1. Politics
2. Anti-inflation
3. RVNAF
4. Police/intelligence
5. Administration.

Moreover, by 1961, or at the latest 1963, given the absence of earlier improvement, U.S. troops were needed in addition to such improvement. [And if these had led to massive infiltration -- i.e., as in late '65 -- bombing of infiltration routes in NVN would also have been necessary.] Against only 5 percent communists, a regime can destroy them if it gains enough support. But against 20 percent, Diem's aims of eradicating the Communist Party, or even of permanently excluding it from politics, were always unrealistic -- except perhaps in 1955. [See discussion in D-19127, "Vu Van Thai on U.S. Aims and Intervention in Vietnam."] His aim should have been:

(a) to transform the aims and aggressiveness of communists, not by containment alone; and

(b) acceptable compromise.

A faction comprising 15-30 percent of the population is very big -- especially in an underdeveloped society. (Quite apart from other strengths of the communists in South Vietnam). It is enough for most political aims. You don't need a numerical majority; in a less-developed country (LDC), you might almost say that a coherent faction of 20-30 percent is a majority! Indeed, given that at least 50 percent of the population in an LDC will be relatively passive, a dedicated faction of, say, 30 percent is virtually guaranteed to have a majority of activists; no other party can have more.

Communists in an LDC can always appeal to 5-20 percent of the population who want violence, overthrow of the social system. (There are more of these than you might think.) But their extremism, at the same time, limits their appeal beyond this group. It makes it hard for them to get a moderate degree of support; in rough terms, either they get fanatic support, or they must rely on coercion. [This is an over-simplification, although a suggestive one in gross terms; they do try, and to some extent succeed, to influence attitudes and behavior in between these extremes. But as Thai says, it is not wholly within their control to modify their "image," which does cost them some support from moderates.]

"We tried to fight 20 percent of the people with the willing support of only 20 percent." But just to hold down 15-20 percent of the population, organized like the VC, to a subordinate political position, you need the moderate support of 40-70 percent: plus effective leadership and administration. The GVN needed "at least a mass in the middle that would lean toward the Government as the pressure from the communists became stronger." [I.e., as the threat of a communist takeover increased: an "anti-bandwagon effect." Thai speculates that in recent years this could be an "anti-bandwagon effect" operating in both directions, reflecting a growing "double allergy" of the masses to both factions, the VC and the GVN. "The lesser of two evils may be the one whose chances of final, total control are more remote." In a moment of crisis -- as at Tet, '68 -- the momentary "underdog" may look relatively less threatening, more

worthy of support, till the crisis passes. This doesn't mean there is not also some bandwagon effect, but merely that it may be tempered by this reverse impulse on the part of others, galvanized by the threat of takeover.]

As for activist support: the NLF had, say, 30,000 cadre, "the faithful," plus 100,000 "dedicated" supporters (say, 5 percent of a reliable, organized following estimated at 2 million). Other elements in the society could rival this, in numbers. The Buddhists, in their Struggle Movements in 1963 showed a potential for at least as many cadre and dedicated activists. Even the unions and the Hoa Hao could have the equivalent. But in the Diemist regime, "20 had faith, 1000 were dedicated (though even these lacked extremist zeal)."

In general, dedicated anti-communists in Vietnam don't have either the missionary zeal or the influence over the neutral masses of the communists. The anti-communists are fanatic only in a conservative, defensive mission (as in Tet, 1968). "At the wall, they are equal to the communists. One meter away from the wall, they are no longer equal."

[This may be an important factor in the tendency of the war in Vietnam to move to a violent equilibrium, a stalemate -- often distressingly "near the wall" for the GVN, as in 1961, 1963-1965, and early 1968 -- rather than a decisive victory for either side.]

Lacking a doctrine that would fanaticize even 5-10 percent of the population to confront the communist-organized 20 percent, the GVN needed at least moderate support from, say, 40 percent, in order: (a) to inhibit growth of the communists, then (b) to gain support of others, then (c) to reduce communist influence. And we should have aimed to keep even the opposing 20 percent, still more the 50-60 percent in the middle, from becoming or supporting guerrillas: by giving them a peaceful, more comfortable route to participating in running local affairs and to have a chance, digging up both recruits and support, at ruling the country. [However, we tend to believe non-communists can't compete successfully with communist organization in

open politics, or in a coalition government. We would rather fight communists in a guerrilla war! Yet one might conjecture that insurgency -- violent politics, not open or "peaceful" politics -- is precisely what communist doctrine and organization is optimal for.] [Who would have won in open politics in 1945?] Ta Thu Thau, the Trotskyite leader, might have beaten Ho. But in 1945, non-Communists lacked know-how, sanctuary, support. (By now, they have learned a lot.) In a vacuum of law, there was only violent politics. In 1955, we should have offered peaceful politics. Communists would use violence anyway: but in that context, that would have emasculated their appeal and stimulated the non-communists to coalesce.

The fundamental problem in Vietnam was not "distractions" and irrevocable splits in society (as Pfaff and Stillman assert in "Can We Win in Vietnam?"). These were natural in times of crisis. Indeed, in spite of all, Vietnamese society did not fall apart, after 25 years of turmoil. It could even be judged relatively solid. The problem was that the national government was not willing to pay the price of an effective fight against communists: cutting privileges, setting standards of promotion, broadening the political base of participation and support.

These reforms might have jeopardized the existence of the regime, as it was based on control by a narrow clientele. The GVN could, indeed, lose the support of that clientele before winning a mass base. They would leave the country. Had there been monetary reform and a unified rate of exchange right at the beginning, much of the clique profits from corruption or unrealistic exchange rates would have disappeared. The profiteers would have left the country for good. Diem would have had to find a different base.

Is Nationalism Critical to Insurgency?

[Is South Vietnam's experience unique? Was the earlier war of independence, 1946-1954, essential preparation for VC growth 1958-on? Is the nationalist issue essential to insurgent growth and success?]

[Since this "D" was in draft, Sir Robert Thompson's new book, No Exit From Vietnam, has appeared, with a passage bearing so closely upon this question that it deserves to be cited in full as backdrop to Thai's views, which are in direct contradiction.

> Mao Tse-tung could not have won his war in China against the Kuomintang and Chiang Kai-shek, unless he had been able to build up his organization for that purpose on a foundation of patriotism during the war against Japan. The cause which appealed to the Chinese peasant was patriotism not communism, nor even land reform. Similarly, in Malaya, the Malayan Communist Party would not have been able to create the organization for a People's Revolutionary War against the colonial power on the basis of its cause after 1945, if the foundations for such an organization had not already been laid during the Second World War when the Party led the resistance, with Allied support and approval, against the Japanese occupation. The same was true in Vietnam. The original organization was built up during the Japanese War and then forged during the Vietminh War against the French colonial power. This organization could not have been created from scratch in South Vietnam, on the basis of the cause which the Vietcong were promoting at the beginning of the present war in the short time available between 1954 and 1959. If that had been the case President Diem would have had little difficulty in dealing with it as he dealt with the Binh Xuyen bandits in Saigon immediately after he came to power. The Vietcong's basic organization was already in existence and was inherited from the Vietminh. The shortcomings of the Diem regime and the contradictions within Vietnamese society were the excuse rather than the reason for the insurgency and, with the organization ready to be reactivated, they made its promotion a practical proposition.
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> As an aside, it is one of the reasons why there is such a difference between the war in Vietnam in its early stages and the present situation in the north-east provinces of Thailand. The conditions have not existed there to promote an effective cause for an indigenous insurgent movement. Certainly there are dissidents whose grievances can be exploited, but there has been no adequate constructive cause on which to build an effective underground organization for revolt. North East Thailand is, therefore, two stages behind -- the cause has to be developed and then the organization built up. If the threat to the Thai Government in

> that area is to be expanded rapidly, it can only be done by infiltration through Laos. Neither of these two stages were necessary in Vietnam so that the present war got off to a flying start.*

Nationalism is important as a factor in communist appeal now and (even more) as a factor in the historical tradition of the NLF and the growth of its roots. But, in Thai's opinion, it has not been critical in either aspect to the growth of the NLF to its present strength, though it affected the timing of this growth. (This judgment is relevant to "lessons" that might be drawn for countries where the issue of nationalism does not arise: e.g., Thailand.)

The Viet Minh past helped a lot in getting the NLF off to a fast start, and speeded up growth. And it contributed greatly to NLF know-how. (Experienced cadre not only helped growth -- helped organize the sympathetic 25 percent of the population faster and better -- but also made the organization much less vulnerable to police and military countermeasures.) Yet, in Thai's opinion, their appeal and strength would be just about as great now if the NLF had had no anti-French past.

Some of the best cadre were recruited after 1954 on an anti-Diem basis. They could have achieved their present size and appeal eventually -- even by now -- without any "nationalist background." On the other hand, the VC would be larger than they are now if they had as strong a nationalistic appeal as that of the Viet Minh.

By 1957, Diem had undercut the nationalist issue completely; Vietnam was independent. The remaining critical issue was social justice. (And the insurgency situation itself was bound to accentuate the corruption and other features of injustice.) "Diem almost beat the communists himself in 1954-57. If only he had had a positive appeal..."

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*Sir Robert Thompson, No Exit From Vietnam, Chatto and Windus, London, 1969, pp. 30-31. (Italics added.)

"Without the earlier war against the French, it would still have taken only a few years more for the Communists to organize: on the basis of social justice and the failings of the Diem regime, rather than hostility to the French." Northeast Thailand now is equivalent to South Vietnam in 1957; it couldn't blow up in five years, but could in 10 years. But communists take the long view; they think themselves unbeatable in long run. [Does it not remain to be demonstrated that a rebel organization can grow strong enough to topple a fairly strong authority, (i.e., one like Diem, not like Batista) without the favorable environment provided by the nationalist issue: such as was raised before 1954 in Vietnam?]

Thai: Yes, it is possible on issues other than nationalism, if there is an outside source of supply. [But it could be argued that the degree of commitment of the DRV to the struggle, in face of U.S. bombing, reflects more its nationalistic strain than its communist make-up.] The problem in countering this growth is to keep the government and United States from destroying the conditions for a "reasonable" success against rebellion (as distinct from conditions for "victory" as we have imagined, a goal possibly unattainable in some other places, just as it was in Vietnam).

Could Diem Have Achieved Adequate Administration?

"Consider that he could not keep me -- though I was an apolitical civil servant, a technician. Could he really afford to do without those like me?" If a government could develop good administration without close relations with the people, without drawing up leaders the Wolf-Leites approach, with its emphasis on efficient management, would work. An administration like that of the British in Malaya, as Sir Robert Thompson or Dennis Duncanson have suggested, would have been effective in Vietnam: indeed before 1959, Thai believes, adequate by itself to have contained the communist challenge. But the British Malayan Administration was not like Diem's, nor, earlier, the French. Rather, Thai says: "I could have been reconciled to colonialism, if the English had run Vietnam rather than the French."

Regrettably, Diem's administrative and military apparatus had been taken over from the French and Bao Dai regimes. These people were all used to looking to superiors for guidelines and initiatives. They were competent at carrying out orders (the trouble was Diem's judgment and over-centralization); but they had no ability to support the decision process, to evaluate policy, to initiate policy recommendations. The need was for 40-50 people of a different breed, more independent and talented, at higher levels. It was not enough to have a "Korea-type" military coup; what was needed was to ensure introduction of civil talent.

Diem's big mistake in 1954-1955 was keeping, relying on, surrounding himself with, discredited collaborators of the French; not seeking the participation of those who had fought the French, as well as more "attentistes" like himself, who had at least stayed aloof from the French. Diem could even have achieved his maximum goals if, in 1955, instead of the cabinet he chose in April-May after defeat of the Binh Xuyen, he had set out to reform his administration, win over the population, and adopted a different cabinet, style, and better, more acceptable village chiefs. If the chiefs had been popular, the Viet Cong could not have killed them off; the people would have defended them or would have been alienated by the Viet Cong terror [a use of "counter-revolutionary judo"]. [One needed these "super" efforts -- not just matching "Asian standards" -- to achieve Diem's goals, in the conditions of '55 in South Vietnam. One had to regard the communists as an extreme challenge, needing the full support of the people and a reformed administration.]

The strategy for containing the communists should have been first to destroy the control of the neo-colonialists, then (with support of the masses) to confront the communists. Instead, the GVN and United States tried to destroy the communists first -- the stronger element -- with the support of neo-colonialists. But the latter weren't strong enough and weren't capable of attracting others. Neither the communists nor the GVN faction promoted the coalescence of the masses: whose support was needed to beat the communist

extreme. (However, "if the United States had backed Diem after the events of 1963, the whole society would have been extremist, against us.")

In 1955 either Diem or the United States "could" have chosen the former course; in 1959, only the United States could break the power of the neo-colonialists. But one still had time to confront the communists with the coalescense of non-communist forces; not, probably, in hopes of achieving Diem's anti-communist aims, but at least to achieve a good compromise. As late as 1959, all you needed to contain communist influence was a government that had (a) a "communicative style" and (b) was competent. [It was also, surely, essential to win the Sects and Montagnards as allies.] This could have been achieved by a new government in a year or two, by 10-15 good Director-Generals (like Thai in the Budget Directorate, 1957). There were enough human resources -- if you promoted the right ones, rewarded initiative. (Thai's budget was a model for SEA.)

However, by 1961, after grass-roots reorganization of the Viet Cong, you needed more than this. You needed a government with more popular support; able to mobilize energies and talents, confront the political program of the communists. Moreover, by 1963, perhaps even by 1961, U.S. combat intervention was essential, even to avoid communist domination. [But earlier, by 1957, Diem and the United States had become over-confident from victory over the Binh Xuyen (who were not like communists: rather, Thai says, "a facade like the neo-colonialists") and the Hoa Hao. His internal critics had subsided, like Hitler's generals after Munich, and Diem developed unwarranted confidence in the face of a much bigger threat: the Viet Cong.]

The Impact of U.S. Policy in Laos, 1961-1962

Diem's position to LBJ (that the impending Laos settlement endangered Vietnam and raised doubts about the U.S. commitment) when the latter visited in the spring of 1961 was to be expected. "What position would you take [in Diem's place] if you knew someone was

coming deliberately to 'restore confidence' after some action of the United States?"

"(a) Get LBJ to make statements to serve Diem's internal political needs;

(b) ask for additional aid.

All this in claiming Laos had jeopardized confidence."

The actual impact of Laos on Vietnamese thinking was more complex:

(1) Diem regarded himself, and his relations with the United States, as unique; he refused to draw "lessons" from events elsewhere in Asia (i.e., of the form, "U.S. abandoned Laos, therefore might abandon me").

(2) Diem thought Laos was a lesson for the United States to associate itself with strong leaders, like him.

(3) Still, he did worry about infiltration. He did think that the United States should have put troops in Laos; he was angry at the United States, though not convinced they would abandon South Vietnam.

Nguyen Ngoc Tho (the Vice President) and others in the country did turn toward "neutralization" as the expected solution;

(1) One group hoped for this (reflecting a favorable reaction to the Laos solution, and an unfavorable view of Diem's reaction to Thi's 1960 attempted coup). They had a vague notion (all such notions were vague in the absence of any free discussion) of non-communist government.

(2) Others feared communist control. (First to leave would be the business community.)

Vietnamese doubts in the fall of 1961 reflected not Laos negotiations so much (they saw Laos as landlocked, "hopeless") but doubts raised by our earlier policy in Laos: doubts that we could conceive of an effective policy to stop communists, not of our will. For example, they felt there had always been a greater chance of stopping communists with Souvanna than with Phoumi, because of Vietnamese experience.

U.S. Options in 1961

"Among Vietnamese of independent thinking, none has the scale of U.S. contacts and relationships that I have. Yet no American official has ever asked me for advice on U.S. policy. (E.g., in the 1963 Buddhist crisis.) The only exception was Harriman when I left in 1961. I told him then: 'Vietnam is lost: unless you are ready to stand on your principles -- making it clear you are interested in sharing the defense of Vietnam only if there is agreement on the final purpose in Vietnam, on a democratic system -- in particular, on the end of arbitrary arrest.'"

"Popular dictatorship" might be best to avoid communists -- but the United States had no ability to influence an unpopular dictatorship to take measures to become popular. For one thing, U.S. pressure would make the regime an evident puppet which would prevent it from being popular; to be effective, the pressure would have to become obvious, and there would be open conflict.

Dictatorship can be popular and strong; or unpopular, but strong enough to confront its threats. But if it is unpopular, the United States cannot force it to become popular, by pressure or manipulation -- except, perhaps, by standing on open principles, with major sanctions.

U.S. leverage must be based on principle, one that we can stand on and justify openly if the GVN brings it into the open. Effective pressure must be capable of exposure. A U.S. stand on principle in 1957 -- encouraging organization by an opposition -- could have led Diem to reform then. By 1961, Diem would not reform and could not become popular; so Thai, in asking for an end to arbitrary arrest, was recommending (consciously) a policy that would have led to organized political opposition. The likely result was a military coup, but one which had to come to terms with civilian leaders. In other words, this was a path to the downfall of Diem, as Diem foresaw!

The U.S. Government doesn't really believe in its democratic (representative, libertarian) principles, for other countries: especially "underdeveloped" countries threatened (however remotely)

by communism. [See my D-19129: "U.S. Policy and the Politics of Others."] Rather, the United States believes in stopping communism by a "strong man."

"Who is the strong man?" -- the United States asks, looking for leadership to support: and finds Chiang, Rhee, Diem, Batista, Franco, Sarit, Park. But a strong man in Vietnam should be based neither on military dictatorship nor on "doctrinal dictatorship" (i.e., like the communist). [Thus, if the regime is unpopular, and, because it is also weak, needs to be popular (Vietnam, 1960-on), the only alternative may be a more democratic government. Or else, a shift to a different, more popular dictatorship, and/or a more competent/effective one. But it was unlikely in Vietnam that a military dictatorship would be strong and competent enough to dispense with more political support.]

but if it is weak, can it afford to become democratic? Yes, or at least avoid such practices as arbitrary arrest.

The ARVN Threat

Meanwhile, a threat from the Army, and Diem's reaction to it, began increasingly to hamper military administration. Colonel Thi's attempted coup in November 1960 was both the symptom of widespread popular discontent with the Diem regime, and, along with Diem's reaction, the cause of further discontent. Among other things, the Thi coup shook the credibility of Diem's police as a deterrent. Even more important was Diem's failure to carry out the promises of reform he had made to the coup forces, and his repression of oppositionists. "After Thi's coup, there would have been a military coup sooner or later -- though later than '63 without the Buddhist uprising, unless the communist threat advanced so far the military saw a threat to survival."

Our look

A coup-prone Army is one more result of a lack of political "crystallization." In countering a rebellion, as the Army suffers losses, a commander is bound to ask, "Why not me, instead of this civilian?" There must, to avoid this, be a constitutional, accepted political order for a "truly professional" Army to protect. Lacking this crystallization, it is better to have a "political army," well-

indoctrinated, because it will take over anyway, once the fighting starts.

With respect to ARVN, Diem could have:

1. Taken in major ex-Viet Minh officers: e.g., Nguyen Nyoc Bich, Deputy Commander of 9th Interzone (Camau).

2. Taken in highly-trained Vietnamese (e.g., graduates of the École Polytechnique), given them high staff positions, let them learn on the job.

3. Weeded out, over time, those officers most corrupted by service under the French.

Instead, (a) he accepted all the French-trained officers; (b) after the battle with the Binh Xuyen, he eliminated (by kicking upstairs) the best officers, who had beaten the Binh Xuyen -- Minh, Don, Kim -- and replaced them with others who were mediocre, more ambitious, less career-oriented.

The best protection against a coup would have been a broad, non-military political base. As for the Buddhist Struggle that triggered a change in U.S. policy and an ARVN coup: What were the conditions that permitted these revolts?

Thai's premises:

(a) The Buddhist Struggle was a genuine mass revolt; leaders rose up, "had" to lead; indeed, ultimately the leaders failed the masses by failing to pursue a revolution after the coup.

(b) The Army was already coup-prone (see above) and the Buddhist Struggle merely made it move sooner; but if the Army had not moved when it did, others would have: students, unions, etc.

(c) If none of these nor the communists had moved decisively, the Hoa Hao and Binh Xuyen armies would have come back: stronger than before.

(d) Hence, deterioration would have been almost as fast even had Diem stayed on longer.

[What were the grievances of the masses?]

"(a) Discrimination:

-- by region (Center, North, South, in order of preference)

-- religion

-- family/clique preferences

-- social class (style, origins of officials).

(b) Arbitrariness; personal/family rule; arrogant style."

This is not to say that a coup, especially after 1961, had great promise of improving matters. The trouble with proposals during 1961-1963 by some U.S. critics of Diem to replace him by a military coup and military regime: Most of these didn't see the danger and likelihood of a Diemist regime without Diem. High ARVN officers not only shared the defects of the civil administrators of the French or Bao Dai regimes: as national leaders, they suffered from even greater stigma.

All the top ARVN leaders were recruited and trained in an army that was created expressly for the purpose of fighting their country's independence. There is no other example of this in the countries of the world. Other armies have colonial antecedents -- Indian, Pakistan, Malayan, Korean, Indonesian -- but none fought for the colonial power against independence.

Meanwhile, the population's aversion to the French had been far greater than toward either the Viet Cong or the GVN now, "a result of one hundred years of humiliation: discrimination, arrogance, racialism." ("French colonials were not like British, or even like metropolitan French...").

"It was inexcusable to fight for the French. Or even for Bao Dai. Only two courses were open for a man of principle: the Viet Minh, or attentisme. My own father was assassinated by the communists in 1944; yet there was no other choice for me after 1945 but to join with the Viet Minh."

Most ARVN generals are men who have sold themselves: first to a foreign power, then again and again, opportunistically. Not, in short, promising candidates for national leadership in a struggle against the

former liberators of the country. Yet by a miracle, the actual coup was carried out by men of status, non-Diemists, although these men had earlier been eliminated from real power. This happened because the Diemist field commanders couldn't combine. They distrusted each other, feared betrayal: being the type for it. The natural thing was for the coup to be run by types like Co, Thieu, Ky, Khanh, who were in command of field units. Don, Kim, etc., didn't have enough strength or influence in August '63, when the United States urged them on to run a coup; and the others were too suspicious of each other, though they desired a coup. It took the Minh/Don group till November to organize enough others. Minh, Kim, Don, had no real power, no field command, in ARVN; for the coup, they relied on Dinh, and on the lack of coordination/cooperation among Diemist forces.

Thus, Minh, et al, couldn't be "effective" immediately on taking over, after the November coup. He had no real power base, no command of troops; yet he was too "gentlemanly" to ask for U.S. help.

Moreover, the coup leaders had had little contact with the United States (hence, we suspected them of being "pro-French"). They had heard Henry Cabot Lodge would be a "pro-consul"; hence, after the coup, they wanted Thai as Ambassador in Washington, as a counterweight to Lodge. [This proved to be an over-estimation of Lodge's chosen role; evidently, he relaxed after the coup, counselled Washington against interfering, then became preoccupied with the 1964 nominating campaigns.] For dignity, legitimacy, they dealt with the United States at arms' length, as government to government, didn't reveal their political problems, or ask for U.S. support. To gain support from field commanders, they had to look independent of the United States; yet this left them vulnerable to another coup.

Thai returned to Vietnam, on Minh's invitation, on 29 January 1964: just in time for the Khanh coup. He remained for three months, officially as Ambassador to the United States. (General Khiem was finally sent in June 1964.) General Don said after the Khanh coup: "If only Thai had been in Washington a few months by January 1964."

[As it was, no one in the U.S. Government spoke up for support of Minh/Don/Kim against Khanh.]

Minh, et al, were inclined to press for "civil government" as a counterweight to corps/division commanders, to preserve their own influence. All in all, considering the talent in the coup group as a whole, its legitimacy and relative popularity, and its incentive and inclination to look beyond the military for broad civilian participation and support, the exact make-up of the Government after Diem was an unforeseeable godsend to the United States: but a fragile one, requiring help. The United States missed the chance.

By accepting the Khanh coup against Minh in January 1964 and the certainty of more coups and increasing ARVN dominance, we got what we should have most feared: A Diemist regime without Diem.

[Is the notion "the war is mainly political" -- with its implication that the political shortcomings of Diem and his successors made a critical difference -- overdrawn, when one considers the role of outside support (which was always potentially able to raise the military dimension to high levels if necessary)?]

The "political" part applies especially (a) so long as the revolution draws most resources from the target country; and (b) while revolutionary capabilities are still too small, yet needs are too large, to rely entirely on coercion for internal support, and (c) before the internal base of guerrillas, local forces, and apparatus is developed enough to sustain regular forces from outside, operating in a "guerilla mode." [Perhaps also (d) when external support plus current internal support is inadequate to achieve insurgent ends -- e.g., in the face of large external support to the opposing regime -- though in this case military/diplomatic measures to get the external power to withdraw support may be more useful than measures to gain additional internal support.]

[But (Chuck Cooper) would not the DRV always have moved militarily to overwhelm -- with NVA, if necessary -- any progress based by the GVN upon effective political development?]

Thai: In 1954, communists had wide sympathy going for them, but little else. They never had been strongly organized in the South.

In Interzone V [e.g., Quang Ngai, Binh Dinh] where they had been in complete control, there was the sharpest anti-communist feeling. (In a former Viet Minh-run area, depth of communist penetration vies with popular antipathy to the communists based on experience.) This area would have been relatively easy to pacify in 1956-1958 -- especially with the regroupees gone -- if the GVN had been more popular.

The communists had lost much appeal, by popular experience, by 1955 in the North: by 1962-1963 in the South. Their own political strategy in the South has not been flexible or highly effective. (They would have won in Tet, 1968, if they had not limited their political base to a broad minority.)

It is not true communists are the only movement cutting across sociological lines: the unions do, too -- though they had to be apolitical. The role of labor unions (and specifically, Buu) has been crucial in keeping the urban masses from going to the communists. They have restrained the worst abuses of Diem and generals in the cities, and have assured that workers shared in the prosperity brought by aid and war.

Fifty percent of the people in the South, in 1956, had an allergy to the communists, but not yet to the GVN. But the last came quickly. Diem sent in "mandarins." Overnight, the people had to step off the road and tip their hats when a district official went by. The switch was abrupt, from communist style to the pre-World War II style.

Illustrating the effects of Diemist "style" on the relations of officials to people, Thai recalls: "I believed mistakenly in community development in 1955; I sold Diem on this. As a result, I was responsible for the biggest forced labor program: though this was later overwhelmed by the strategic hamlets. Diem would ask the Province Chiefs, "How is Community Development?" Soon there was a huge forced labor program -- roads, offices, etc. -- even at the expense of the rice harvest. I was

so angry.... One day I was driving in a jeep, wearing khaki, near Tam Ky. I called some peasants from the field and said in authoritative tones, 'Dig a trench across the road' pointing in front of my jeep. Instead of saying: 'No; who are you? Go to hell!' they dug a trench. I drove the jeep over it, then said: 'Now, fill it up.' They did. Then I asked them why they had obeyed. They said, 'Well, you were in a jeep.' I told Diem this story (which is why I had done the test). He said, 'Of course they did. They were right to obey. You were wrong to ask them!'"

If, on the contrary, a good political program had started in 1956, the communists could not have grown so large; then the NVA would have lacked a popular base. Without an adequate guerrilla structure and apparatus to rely on, the DRV could not have employed the NVA as they did. Even now, if the 75 percent of the people who are non-communist were "crystallized" (i.e., if one could remove people's allergy to GVN but not to the VC), NVA pressure could be repelled "just like Korea."

Pressure by NVA is a serious risk to any political program; but no alternative to "politics" offers better odds. The chance of success through politics is about as good now as ever; say, 50-50. It is, indeed, necessary for the long-run avoidance of communist domination that the DRV change its present objectives (which are already changed from the past), and come to accept a non-communist regime in the South. This is possible, if we exploit internal conflicts: but not by or during war pressure, without negotiations. [See discussion in Vu Van Thai, RM-5997, Fighting and Negotiating in Vietnam: A Strategy.] [But in '56, neither Diem nor Ho wanted open political competition; nor did the United States, which (a) didn't see an advantage in competition, or any risk in avoiding it; (b) hoped to win eventually, without it; (c) saw a risk in allowing it that was exaggerated until 1958-1959, after which we still under-rated the risk of avoiding it.]

Thai thought in 1961: unless Diem is removed, the communists would win utterly. But he was sure Diem would be removed. He foresaw

escalation of cost, and a narrowing of alternatives through escalation of stakes.

But when Diem became unviable, our subsequent policy led to catastrophe: removing the best of the regime -- Diem himself -- and leaving the worst: the Diem machinery.