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TIME AND LIMITED SUCCESS AS ENEMIES OF THE VIETCONG

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A commonly held view about the war in Vietnam is that the longer the conflict continues without major progress for the US-GVN forces, the more hopeless the situation will become for the cumbersome military machinery of the foreign protectors. Under some circumstances this might conceivably be the effect; but it is worth speculating a bit on the way time itself might work to seriously undermine the essential political nexus of the Vietcong movement. Our interest then is not with the impact of military pressures on the military components of the Vietcong, but rather with the possible effects that several political-psychological trends may have on the morale and competence of the total organization.

Assuming no major Vietcong military breakthrough but a gradual extension of their current pattern of operations, time may present several sets of dangers to the insurgency. The first of these is increasing popular disillusionment, and then apathy and even internalized opposition which has been common to most communist movements once they actually assume the functions of a government. In opposition, communism--indeed any activist political rebellion--

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can certainly promise much, raise hopes and highlight the numerous shortcomings of the existing government, while at the same time working diligently to undermine any forward movement of the entire system. But once in power following the initial spurt of energy and enthusiastic ideology, the former militants begin to share in the unpopularity and dissatisfaction that is the usual due of most governments in countries with severe problems. Communist movements may be lithe and supple, but communist regimés, for reasons of doctrine and for lack of experience in some of the subtleties of consensus politics, are often exceedingly heavy-handed in taking command of a society. And a communist regime at war obviously places unexpected burdens on its new constituency in order to satisfy its own short-run needs, thus postponing any genuine progress toward the millennium. In retrospect, the previous government often doesn't appear so bad to the population after all.

The Vietcong are now beginning to face this problem. Time has yielded scattered military victories and widened rural control, but it has not brought complete victory and peace and the numerous promises of land, aid, decreased financial burdens and increased freedom for the masses have not been fulfilled. On the contrary, the Vietcong's demands on the population have continually increased and become more and more compulsory while, at the same time, the pressures and problem of war increase. In the economic realm, for example, all persons in rural areas subject to some degree of systematic Vietcong influence are expected to contribute almost the major portion of their time, energy and material goods to the insurgency. Production taxes

range anywhere from 20% to 80% of individual incomes. And part of those goods not formally "taxed" away must, under equal compulsion, go to feed and house fighters passing through the villages, to purchase "liberation" bonds, to provide clothing for the war effort, or must be sold to the Vietcong at lower than actual market prices. With Vietcong presence, therefore, the majority of villagers find themselves living at bare subsistence standards. Equally as onerous are the vast number of services which the Vietcong demand, such as the building and maintaining of combat hamlets, local sabotage activities, special production and trade missions, and regular porter or other "corvée labor" duties. Ultimately, every person of age and strength is incorporated in some way into the Front's fighting ranks.

In its "liberated" areas, moreover, Vietcong promises and strength are most openly put to the test because the movement is attempting to establish itself in the popular mind as the legitimate government. The rural population is no longer merely to contribute to a "cause" or to support a rival movement: taxes, corvée labor and enlistment in the Vietcong forces are demanded of persons as citizens, as duties rightfully owed to "the government." But in return, the Vietcong have not provided the usual services of a government: not land (unmarred by additional tax and labor demands), not education and medical aid, and not even adequate subsistence living standards or physical security. Furthermore, in "liberated" areas there appear to be few excuses for delaying popular reforms and not giving aid. The Vietcong have had both time and control, and the "help us get started" or "once

only" appeals, or the threat of ARVN intervention ruining plans can no longer be salient arguments in the villagers' eyes.

These "government" exactions, in combination with the failure of the Vietcong to fulfill promises, seem to be causing an ever-widening number of South Vietnamese to become disillusioned and disgruntled with the Vietcong. This is true of persons within contested areas also. In retrospect, then, the GVN looks better than it once did: there was some aid (with few strings attached); taxes were at least three times lower or negligible; work on strategic hamlets was less demanding than for the Vietcong's combat hamlets; and freedom of movement, marketing, and communication were not nearly so restricted.

Personal disaffection from the Vietcong has of course, had different effects. Fearful of punishment or caught in hopelessness, many people continue cooperating with the Vietcong. On the other hand, some stay within Vietcong areas but attempt to avoid the Vietcong and their demands by making excuses and complaining, arguing with and insulting the village personnel, more quietly deciding to produce less or smuggle goods out, or more openly refusing to listen and cooperate. Finally, an ever-increasing number are fleeing to GVN areas. The refugee flow is caused by many factors, among which are war devastation initiated by our side. But a desire to escape from Vietcong presence and demands is also an important cause. And there is every reason to suppose that this kind of disaffection from the Vietcong will continue, especially as the insurgency becomes more desperate for resources and military pressure on it increases. It is simply an

understandable process of being fed-up and weary, or of becoming more increasingly angry and hostile.

Time may also work against the Vietcong in another way. At first, in 1959-61, many persons excited or feeling threatened by the first surge of Vietcong power on the national level may have joined the movement because it was effective and looked like the winning side. Now, six years later, an eventual victory for the Vietcong is not so clearly in sight and their repeated promises of "peace next year" have not been brought to fruition. Nor is Vietcong control firm enough in most areas to give people the feeling that it will last, that the GVN forces will not return at some time. There are, in effect, no "safe havens." With each passing year the Vietcong's failure to secure victory in more than eight years of struggle should cause the bandwagon followers to re-examine the risks of loyalty. Many will choose either a middle position of neutrality or the GVN side because it offers more short-run advantages. Many persons have fled from Vietcong areas, for example, not because they actually favor the GVN, but simply because life promises to be at least safer and materially more prosperous.

It may also be true that more and more people are becoming immune to the Vietcong's presence. This does not necessarily mean the population ceases to cooperate with them; but it does imply that the Vietcong are becoming less interesting and exciting, less of an inspiring cause and more of a burden and a bore. When the Vietcong tax collectors come around daily, knocking on doors and badgering people about back taxes, the villagers begin to see them as more vulnerable, more ordinary and probably weaker than before.

Time may also work in several ways against the Vietcong within their own ranks. A great deal of the Vietcong's energy seems to rest upon the genuine conviction of the cadres, and the change in role from fighting movement to political administration can easily pose a serious danger to that commitment. This change will necessarily involve a certain amount of bureaucratization, opportunistic and careerist in-fighting, sloppiness, some corruption and the like. Rousseau's paradoxical comment that the revolution institutionalized is the revolution corrupted and betrayed applies as well to the Vietcong as it did to the revolutions of 1789 and 1917. The realities of factionalist bureaucratic politics, especially after a period of intense hardship, may thus have a negative impact on many of the true believers within the movement.

Secondly, the increasing disinterest or the veiled hostility of the rural population has seemingly had and will continue to have seriously harmful effects on Vietcong morale and behavior. This could be expected: the political cadres, who have honestly absorbed an ideology which tells them that they will at last bring justice and material salvation to the masses, that they will win because, in fact, the people support them, have often experienced great emotional and ideological difficulty reconciling their early hopes with the observed and felt hostility of these same people. The regular fighters have expressed similar dismay at the unwillingness of the population to feed and clothe them when they pass through the villages, to pay their taxes willingly, to express an interest in their health and so forth. Such units are often even forbidden to speak or mingle with the villagers for fear of alienating

them. Many villagers simply take the initiative by shutting their doors or leaving their houses temporarily when North Vietnamese Army or Vietcong fighting units arrive.

Finally, more and more of the persons who have been recently (and often forcibly) recruited into the Vietcong in low-level positions are serving within their native hamlets and villages. Such local tax collectors, Liberation Association cell leaders, guerrilla squad leaders and laborers often are very sympathetic to the villagers' plight, and not at all energetic in their activities on behalf of the Vietcong.

Once the Vietcong or any movement wins total power, it matters far less whether or not the population or the cadres remain committed and optimistic--there is nowhere else for them to go and they know it. Most of the activists will be able to swallow their disillusionment and be comforted with the thought of the rewards they might reap for having been with the winning camp before the victory was secure. But when such frustration and despair comes to the cadres and formerly loyal elements of the population while there are still powerful enemies to be defeated and while the disillusioned can still defect or withdraw with relatively little personal risk this process of discouragement and time-weariness is far more likely to become manifest.

The Vietcong appears to be, therefore, a group which has become too much a régime-- yet lacks the power and certainty of full control. It lives in an in-between world of continual struggle, with the tiresome chores of administration, the erosion of quick victory hopes and growing popular indifference. This situation of limited success

must pose a subtle yet direct threat to the continued vitality of the insurgency movement.