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Thematic Summary: The Course of the War

In assessing the South Vietnamese security situation for the new administration in the spring of 1961, INR estimated that during that year the Communist subversive effort would reach its highest level since 1954. If the GVN failed to respond effectively, INR judged, the Viet Cong could supplant the government's authority over a substantial part of southern South Vietnam, even if the Communists were not strong enough to overthrow the central government. INR felt that the deterioration had occurred not only because the Communists were pressing harder, but also because the GVN was making an inept and misdirected response. American officials were not without blame for this situation, since they accepted the GVN's long-standing evaluation of the Communist threat which, in INR's view, overemphasized the chances of overt aggression and understated the danger of internal subversion.

Later in 1961, INR and the rest of the Intelligence Community estimated that Hanoi was likely to increase the pace of the insurgency, which still would be based primarily on local resources within South Vietnam. Although it predicted that the war would be long and difficult, the Intelligence Community generally agreed that areas of VC control could be reduced over the course of time if US aid continued at a high level and the GVN made a strenuous, well-focused and properly implemented effort. In its own independent writing, INR tended to make a more pessimistic estimate of the regime's willingness to make the type of effort required and of its ability to reverse the deteriorating security

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situation. INR continued to think that Diem had not correctly assessed the nature of the threat and that he put far too little emphasis on the political side of the struggle with the VC. By the end of 1961 INR saw no conclusive improvement in the security situation, even though the effort had increased, and noted that the Communist initiative and advantage had yet to be effectively challenged.

As US aid and involvement increased during 1962, INR thought that the best that could be said about their effectiveness was that they had slowed the process of deterioration. Although many officials now declared that the tide had been turned, INR believed that there had been no significant change in the fundamental areas of Communist initiative, organization and morale of cadres, territorial control, and recruitment. Moreover, even though Hanoi seemed determined to rely primarily on local recruitment for the bulk of the Viet Cong forces, INR felt that Hanoi could, with little effort, intensify the war considerably by increasing infiltration, which probably would not be readily detected.

At the end of 1962, INR predicted that the GVN would not be able to halt the deteriorating security trends during the next year, let alone reverse the tide, unless the counterinsurgency effort was accelerated and improved. INR pointed to the negative political and military effects of conventional tactics like large-unit action, especially when accompanied by heavy use of artillery and aircraft--to say nothing of actions like chemical crop destruction. In fact, INR concluded that the military

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could in many ways improve their handling of the war, irrespective of Diem's political deficiencies on which military officials tended to place the blame for all failures. It was in part this view that led INR to disagree with an Estimate before USIB in February 1963 which implied that it would be impossible to "win with Diem." As finally approved in April, the Estimate took a more guarded view: it noted progress and projected the possibility of containing the Viet Cong, but it still questioned Diem's effectiveness, particularly over the long haul.

Even before the Buddhist crisis broke in May, INR had grown more pessimistic about Diem's ability to halt the deterioration, particularly as he sought to circumscribe the US advisory role and failed to stress the vital nonmilitary aspects of the counterinsurgency program. His most striking failure was the strategic hamlet program, which, under the direction of his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu, was used largely as a means of exerting control over the populace and which suffered from mismanagement and lack of funds. INR pointed out that these problems were undermining the program even though on paper statistics could make it appear to be progressing well. In fact, INR felt that the military statistics supplied by the GVN were also of dubious validity and could not be used with any confidence as indices of progress.

The Buddhist crisis, especially by the summer of 1963, appeared to be having an adverse effect on the security situation. In examining various contingencies, as a move against Diem appeared increasingly likely,

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INR suggested that a military-civilian coup need not necessarily have a significantly adverse impact and might even lead to a more effective effort, particularly if public confidence in the government increased.

After Diem's downfall, there was general agreement amongst intelligence agencies that the security situation had deteriorated since the summer of 1963, particularly as it became evident to all that Diem's statistics had been misleading. Having already discounted their validity, INR was not as alarmed as others about the rate of decline immediately after the coup in November. In fact, by the end of the year, INR felt that the new regime had stabilized the situation and was taking steps which would lead to better prosecution of the war; its early overthrow by General Khanh at the end of January 1964, gave the Minh-Tho government insufficient time to prove itself.

After mid-1964, the issues of Hanoi's role and of infiltration again took the spotlight when General Khanh asserted that regular North Vietnamese Army (NVA) units were being sent south and when MACV substantially raised its estimate of infiltration for the year. After much general debate and a consultation in Saigon, the Intelligence Community agreed in November that the rate of infiltration in 1964 had increased over that of 1963, though not to the level of 1962, and that native Northerners were being sent for the first time, but as fillers for VC units and not in regular units of their own.

Not until March 1965 did the US have firm evidence that NVA units had arrived in the South. Their arrival, together with a Viet Cong

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buildup and an ineffective showing by ARVN caused MACV to project the loss of northern South Vietnam unless US combat forces entered the war. In the debate over this issue, which went on for several months, INR disputed MACV's contentions that Hanoi had decided to switch to conventional warfare and that the ARVN could not possibly hold the line. Despite its long-standing deprecation of ARVN capabilities, INR estimated that the ARVN was strong enough to maintain the general stalemate. Moreover, INR did not believe that Hanoi intended to change the unconventional nature of the war, even though there might be bigger attacks, particularly against cities and lines of communication. US ground forces and bombing would not be effective in unconventional war of this sort, in INR's view, and could not bring the war to a close very quickly. The US moves would not undermine Hanoi's determination and, in fact, NVA troop strength in the South was likely to be increased to meet the challenge.

After US troops had been in combat for some five months, INR stated that the deterioration had been halted and the Viet Cong robbed of whatever hopes they had held for early victory. Nevertheless, in INR's analysis, the situation remained a stalemate, for even the maintenance of which the US combat presence was now necessary; however, the qualitative changes necessary for a GVN victory had not yet been made. Hanoi remained determined to persist, the Viet Cong forces were stronger than ever, and the Communists continued to hold the initiative.

Over the next two years, INR continued to detect little improvement in the security situation despite the massive US effort. Viet Cong

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initiative and strength remained intact and, according to INR/CIA analyses, Communist force levels in the South far exceeded MACV's estimates. Moreover, attacks by small VC units were on the increase, the VC political infrastructure was largely undamaged, and VC inroads in the cities were planned. Successful military action tended not to be followed up by extension of GVN territorial-administrative control. Moreover, the ARVN remained an ineffective weapon even in the pacification role which it was increasingly called upon to play; it still operated in a conventional mold with little understanding of or support for the goals of the pacification program which was receiving so much emphasis by the US after the end of 1966; further, INR judged that the speed with which the program was implemented required a rate of conversion to a new type of effort that went far beyond the ARVN's capability to meet.

In INR's view, the United States had demonstrated by 1967 that the Viet Cong could not win but not that they could be defeated. In this stand, it differed fundamentally with Saigon's opinion and with public optimism in Washington. The Tet offensive tended to vindicate INR's position, although INR certainly had not anticipated the scope or nature of that drive. Analyzing Hanoi's motives, INR suggested that the effort was intended to make the war intolerable for the urban residents, thereby undermining the political base of the GVN and creating the impression that the Communists had to be accommodated. This was no last gasp, for the Viet Cong still appeared prepared for protracted warfare; and in fact, aside from their political gains, the Communists had made substantial

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inroads against the pacification program when GVN forces were withdrawn into the cities for a while in order to prevent a recurrence of the Tet offensive.

After early April, when the confrontation began to move slowly into political channels, INR estimated that Hanoi would keep military operations at a moderately high level to support its negotiating position, impeded only by fear of provoking US retaliation and a breakdown in Paris. Unlike many military officials who foresaw a number of offensives on the Tet model, INR felt that there would be sustained widespread attacks on urban and military targets but that they would be less intense than the February offensive. To support this effort, INR thought there still would be a fairly high rate of infiltration.

By the summer of 1968, INR detected evidence of growing Communist problems with the war effort. And, in October, INR thought Hanoi wished to end the phase of intense military action. Nevertheless, Communist capabilities to sustain a relatively high level of violence appeared undiminished and, in November, INR cautioned against expecting that military de-escalation might proceed rapidly. In INR's analysis, the Viet Cong remained strong, disciplined, and determined to keep up the pressure.

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