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# Sir Robert Thompson's Better War: The British Advisory Mission and the South Vietnamese Strategic Hamlet Program, 1961-1963

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SIR ROBERT THOMPSON'S BETTER WAR: THE BRITISH  
ADVISORY MISSION AND THE SOUTH VIETNAMESE  
STRATEGIC HAMLET PROGRAM, 1961-1963

by

Richard Lovering

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Graduate School  
and the Department of History  
at The University of Southern Mississippi  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts

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## ABSTRACT

### SIR ROBERT THOMPSON'S BETTER WAR: THE BRITISH ADVISORY MISSION AND THE SOUTH VIETNAMESE STRATEGIC HAMLET PROGRAM, 1961-1963

by Richard Lovering

May 2017

This thesis examines the interactions between the British Advisory Mission to South Vietnam (BRIAM) and the South Vietnamese government of Ngo Dinh Diem and his American advisors. By studying BRIAM's efforts—and those of its leader, Sir Robert Thompson—this thesis argues that many of the tactics Thompson advocated and Diem executed, especially the Strategic Hamlet Program, foreshadowed the techniques Americans used several years later under General Creighton Abrams, during the period historian Lewis Sorley termed the “better war.”

Sorley argued that the American strategy in the Vietnam War was flawed until Abrams implemented his “one war” plan. With this interpretation, however, he ignored the earlier attempts by BRIAM, Diem, and many of the American advisors to win the war using South Vietnamese forces. Long before the introduction of US combat units into the conflict, the efforts of BRIAM and American advisors to work through the government of South Vietnam mirrored President Richard Nixon and Abrams's later Vietnamization policy.

Drawing from the files of the Foreign Relations of the United States, military documents located in the US National Archives, and BRIAM's records in the British National Archives, this thesis maintains that Abrams's “one war” plan was not a unique, “better war” approach. Thompson and Diem pursued a similar strategy in the early

1960s, and it was Diem's death in the American-backed coup of November 1963 that ended these original efforts at waging a better war in South Vietnam.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Finally, my thesis committee of Drs. Andrew Wiest, Heather Stur, and Allison Abra were unfailingly brilliant in their recommendations that improved both my writing

and my argument's structure, not to mention the way I think about history. Any flaws in the ensuing thesis are mine alone!

## DEDICATION

To my parents, Rich and Arleen, and brothers, Mark and Bill, who have throughout my life been sources of support and stability. “Thank you” does not suffice.



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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<i>ARVN</i>	Army of the Republic of Vietnam
<i>BRIAM</i>	British Advisory Mission
<i>CIA</i>	Central Intelligence Agency
<i>CIP</i>	Counterinsurgency Program
<i>FRUS</i>	Foreign Relations of the United States
<i>GVN</i>	The Government of Vietnam
<i>MAAG</i>	Military Assistance Advisory Group
<i>NLF</i>	National Liberation Front
<i>RAF</i>	Royal Air Force
<i>UK</i>	The United Kingdom
<i>UN</i>	The United Nations
<i>US</i>	The United States

## CHAPTER I – INTRODUCTION

The United States wanted a better war in Vietnam. From 1965 until 1973, this desire led to a steady increase—and then a steady decrease—in the number of American soldiers and marines engaged in combat operations in the jungles, mountains, and deltas of South Vietnam. In 1968, General Creighton Abrams replaced General William Westmoreland, and ‘search and destroy’ gave way to ‘one war’. However, despite Abrams’s (arguably) new emphasis on pacification and winning Vietnamese hearts and minds, public opinion in the United States had long since decided the war was lost, and combat troops were duly withdrawn in 1973. Moreover, without American support, Saigon fell in 1975 to the armored columns of the communist People’s Army of Vietnam.

Abrams’s efforts are the subject of Lewis Sorley’s *A Better War*, in which Sorley maintained that Abrams’s emphasis on training the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (or ARVN) and securing the local Vietnamese population led to tactical success against communist forces during the last years of US involvement.<sup>1</sup> He believed Abrams’s programs represented a new strategy (which resulted in a ‘better war’), and Sorley contrasted the Abrams period with the war of attrition waged by his predecessor in command, Westmoreland. While Westmoreland focused on body counts, Sorley wrote that Abrams prioritized village security, building the capacity of the government of Vietnam (GVN), and improving the logistical and war-fighting capabilities of the ARVN.<sup>2</sup> Ultimately, Sorley argued that perhaps Abrams’s greatest achievement was

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<sup>1</sup> Lewis Sorley, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America’s Last Years in Vietnam* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 1999), xv.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

marshaling the often-disparate efforts of the American military, embassy, and intelligence apparatus towards accomplishing his 'one war' strategy.<sup>3</sup>

However, Sorley failed to compare Abrams's 'one war' with the American effort during the regime of South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem, who led South Vietnam from 1954 until his death in 1963. For much of Diem's regime, the American footprint in South Vietnam was, compared to 1968, minimal and focused more on developing the capabilities of the ARVN and GVN. While a series of coups effectively militarized the GVN after Diem's death, he and his family had offered a nationalist alternative to communism and military dictatorship.

The American advisory effort under Diem differed from the Abrams period in a key area: the Americans in Saigon during Diem often worked to crossed-purposes. This uncoordinated effort contributed to the eventual American combat involvement in South Vietnam when several members of the State Department (to include, perhaps, the American ambassador in Saigon) advocated the overthrow of the Diem government, resulting in the deaths of Diem and his principal advisor, and brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu.

As the Americans argued over the best way to prevent South Vietnam from falling to the communists, the British Advisory Mission (BRIAM) arrived in Saigon. From 1961 until their departure from South Vietnam in 1965, this small group of British counterinsurgency experts of the Malayan Emergency advised Diem and his immediate successors.<sup>4</sup> Operating independent of the American advisory effort, BRIAM advocated securing the local Vietnamese population and using the Vietnamese Civil Guard as the

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<sup>3</sup> Sorley, *A Better War*, xii-xv.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Busch, *All the Way with JFK? Britain, the US, and the Vietnam War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 8-9.

primary means of combating the Viet Cong. The Civil Guard was a provincial-level, paramilitary component of the Vietnamese police force, and by emphasizing their role in the counterinsurgency fight, BRIAM attempted to turn the conflict in South Vietnam into a police action instead of a military conflict.<sup>5</sup> While the South Vietnamese, who had their own strategy for securing their country, did not always follow BRIAM's advice, the methods advocated by the head of BRIAM, Sir Robert Thompson, foreshadowed much of what was later implemented by Abrams, during Sorley's 'better war' period.<sup>6</sup>

While Sorley wrote that Abrams began the 'better war' period in 1968, many of the tenets of his strategy were already in place in 1963—except for the unity of American effort. Indeed, American disunity helped lead to the coup against Diem, which in turn created chaos in South Vietnam, necessitating (in the eyes of President Lyndon Johnson) direct American involvement. The efforts of Diem's regime, with assistance from BRIAM and some of the American advisors, implemented Abrams's 'better war' strategy several years before his arrival in country. Therefore Abrams's 'one war' was not a new strategy as Sorley argued, but rather a return to what was, in many ways, proving successful in the late 1950s and early 60s.

The South Vietnamese did not simply follow BRIAM's advice. Rather, the plan that Thompson submitted to Diem was used by the GVN to convince the Americans to support its own counterinsurgency strategy: the Strategic Hamlet Program. Diem and Nhu had already pursued a similar strategy of securing rural hamlets and villages, and

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<sup>5</sup> Robert Thompson, *Make for the Hills: The Autobiography of the World's Leading Counterinsurgency Expert* (London: Leo Cooper, 1989), 128.

<sup>6</sup> Edward Miller, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 232.

while the Diem regime faced increased pressure from certain American factions to reform, the brothers Ngo saw the arrival of BRIAM as an opportunity to ensure American financial support while avoiding the political adjustments the United States often advocated. Therefore, while BRIAM was a British effort to influence American advisory efforts in South Vietnam, the mission also became a pawn in the Diem regime's political maneuvering against the various American factions that each demanded or advised different strategies or reforms. It was in the face of communist attacks and foreign demands that Diem used BRIAM to influence the United States in an effort to maintain his nation's sovereignty despite needing American largesse to survive.

At the same time, it was Diem and BRIAM's separate-but-similar strategies of securing the population that most matched Abrams's later plans. However, the efforts of the GVN and the British were lost amidst the cacophony of Americans squabbling in Saigon, and by the time the war effort had refocused on the South Vietnamese, the will of the American people was lost. Despite the seeming success of Abrams's tenure, US forces withdrew from South Vietnam in 1973, leaving its government and its people to fate's mercy.

In *A Better War*, Lewis Sorley discussed the impact of Abrams's assumption of command of the Military Assistance Command-Vietnam:

Shaped by Abrams's understanding of the complex nature of the conflict, the tactical approach underwent immediate and radical revision when he took command. Previously fragmented approaches to combat operations, pacification, and mentoring the South Vietnamese armed forces now became 'one war' with a single clear-cut objective—security for the people in South Vietnam's villages and hamlets. And under a program awkwardly titled 'Vietnamization,' responsibility for conduct of the

war, largely taken over by the Americans in the earlier period, was progressively turned back to the South Vietnamese.<sup>7</sup>

However, Sorley failed to mention that the war was the responsibility of the South Vietnamese from 1954 until 1965. It was the American decision to directly intervene in GVN politics, and then to deploy ground forces, that placed control of the war in the hands of the United States.

From 1954 until their deaths in 1963, Diem and Nhu pursued many of the policies that would later be included under what Sorley calls Abrams's 'better war'. Perhaps most prominent of these was the Ngo brothers' recognition that the war against the communists was in many ways a war for the hearts and minds of the South Vietnamese people. They recognized that the war had to be waged at the lowest level, in the villages and hamlets of the countryside. As a result, they implemented the Strategic Hamlet Program, which called for securing rural villages and hamlets in order to protect them from communist insurgents, delivering social services, and consolidating the Ngos' control of the country.

Contemporary Americans and British advisors and diplomats had various opinions of the success of the Diem government and its Strategic Hamlet Program. Some found him and the program tyrannical, driving desperate peasants into the outstretched arms of the insurgency. Others, however, believed the Ngo brothers were successfully expanding government control in a fractured country still recovering from its war of independence. Ultimately, it was these differing opinions—especially among Americans in Saigon—that contributed to Diem's downfall.

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<sup>7</sup> Sorley, *A Better War*, xiii.

Many of the principal American officials and advisors during the Diem era waited several years before publishing accounts of their experiences. Edward Lansdale's autobiography—*In the Midst of Wars* (1972)—and Cecil Currey's biography of Lansdale—*Edward Lansdale: The Unquiet American*—tell slightly different versions of Lansdale's experiences with the CIA in South Vietnam. In his biography, Currey quoted Lansdale as admitting that he wasn't completely truthful in his autobiography. *In the Midst of Wars* presents a very positive portrayal of the Vietnamese with whom Lansdale worked, and he admits that he purposefully downplayed the American role in advising them. The story was adjusted, Lansdale told Currey, to provide the Vietnamese with heroes.<sup>8</sup>

Despite Lansdale's caveat, both versions of his experiences in Southeast Asia emphasized the agency of the Diem government. Lansdale's autobiography relied primarily on his own recollections, and, according to his autobiography, he was active in South Vietnam from 1953 until the end of 1956, during the period in which Diem consolidated his control of the country. Lansdale was absent from South Vietnam during the latter half of Diem's presidency (1957-1963), which encompassed the establishment of the Strategic Hamlet Program, as well as the coup that killed Diem and his brother.

In his autobiography, Lansdale wrote, "There is the way the rest of the world does things. And then there is the Vietnamese way."<sup>9</sup> Meeting Diem shortly after his assumption of power, Lansdale commented, "Our association gradually developed into a

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<sup>8</sup> Cecil B. Currey, *Edward Lansdale: The Unquiet American* (Washington: Brassey's, 1998), 329.

<sup>9</sup> Edward Geary Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars: An American's Mission to Southeast Asia* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1991), 244.



friendship of considerable depth, trust, and candor.”<sup>10</sup> Through this friendship, Lansdale believed that he was able to help Diem help himself and his country; Lansdale claimed he valued the agency of the Vietnamese above all else. Throughout the chapters in his autobiography that address his time in Vietnam, Diem is portrayed as an equal partner, not a local puppet with strings to be pulled.

Currey confirmed Lansdale’s attitude towards the Vietnamese in *Edward Lansdale: The Unquiet American*, including quotes from one of Lansdale’s memorandums. Although its recipient is unclear, Currey speculated it was similar in content to a memorandum Lansdale sent to the United States Pacific Command. The phrases within the brackets are Currey’s additions to Lansdale’s memo:

The crying needs [in Southeast Asia] are stable governments, technical and managerial skills, and capital for [industrial] plants and tools . . . [O]ur policy should be designed to emphasize the pump priming kind of assistance which would enable these nations to do for themselves . . . This will require Americans of unusual ability, and patience.<sup>11</sup>

Lansdale’s emphasis on Vietnamese solutions to Vietnamese problems mirrored the Vietnamization process described by Sorley in *A Better War*. However, Lansdale’s memorandum was written in 1959,<sup>12</sup> while Sorley studied the Abrams era (1968-1973).

Frederick Nolting was the United States ambassador to South Vietnam from 1961 until 1963, although Henry Cabot Lodge replaced him shortly before the November 1963 coup.<sup>13</sup> In 1988, he published his memoirs of his time as ambassador, and relying on his personal recollections and papers, the memoirs of other contemporaries, secondary

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<sup>10</sup> Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars*, 159.

<sup>11</sup> Currey, *Edward Lansdale*, 205.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 387.

<sup>13</sup> Frederick Nolting, *From Trust to Tragedy: The Political Memoirs of Frederick Nolting, Kennedy’s Ambassador to Diem’s Vietnam* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1988), 111.

sources about American involvement in Vietnam, and government documents to make the argument that “the tragedy [of American involvement in Vietnam] is that our political mistakes, outweighing our successes and obscuring our motives, led our country into an unnecessary war, with all its bitter consequences.”<sup>14</sup>

Throughout his memoir, Nolting emphasized Diem’s patriotism and independent agency. While acknowledging Diem’s flaws, Nolting commented that during his ambassadorship, “I continued to think that Ngo Dinh Diem’s government was the best option available to lead South Vietnam and that with our help that government was slowing [sic] achieving its goals of stability, protection, and progress for its people.”<sup>15</sup> Nolting was present in South Vietnam during the establishment of the Strategic Hamlet Program, and he wrote that Nhu and Sir Robert Thompson (the head of BRIAM) were the ones that convinced Diem to implement it.<sup>16</sup> He acknowledged that some hamlets were established before sufficient resources could be allocated to them, but he thought that despite some reports to the contrary, families were only rarely relocated under the program.<sup>17</sup> In general, he found it “was a sound concept and that its results were good.”<sup>18</sup>

Sir Robert Thompson’s books about his role in the Diem era, *Defeating Communist Insurgency* (1966) and his autobiography *Make for the Hills* (1989), supported Nolting’s opinion about the disunity of the American effort. Indeed, Thompson commented that the real problem in South Vietnam was “to get the Americans

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<sup>14</sup> Nolting, *From Trust to Tragedy*, xv.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

and South Vietnamese to work out and adopt an overall strategic plan of campaign.”<sup>19</sup> He believed, too, that the Americans never understood the war, observing, “I had maintained that the Americans could not win a victory in accordance with their concept of war unless they defeated Hanoi in accordance with its concept of war. You do not win a chess game by playing poker.”<sup>20</sup>

Thompson critiqued the American approach in both books, arguing that the American prioritization of expanding the ARVN ensured that the military was the most powerful institution in the country. Consequently, Diem had to devote a significant amount of time to “manipulating the army commands in order to retain control and maintain his position,”<sup>21</sup> and maintaining the large ARVN required continued dependence on American largesse.<sup>22</sup>

Instead of expanding the ARVN, Thompson argued the Americans should have supported the creation of a larger police force. He compared the American emphasis on military solutions to the British experience in the Malayan Emergency, commenting that in Malaya, the army supported the civil authorities (such as the police) while in South Vietnam the roles were reversed.<sup>23</sup> Commenting on his experience in Malaya, he wrote that adherence to law and order “creates the proper psychological attitude in the country

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<sup>19</sup> Thompson, *Make for the Hills*, 129.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency: Experiences from Malaya and Vietnam* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1974), 58.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>23</sup> Thompson, *Make for the Hills*, 128.

as a whole, with the government as the ‘cops’ and the terrorists as the ‘robbers’.”<sup>24</sup> By implication, he felt this was lacking in South Vietnam.

To rectify the situation, Thompson wrote the Delta Plan, which was intended to concentrate the disparate American and South Vietnamese efforts to secure the crucial Mekong Delta.<sup>25</sup> However, Thompson believed his plan was subsumed into the South Vietnamese Strategic Hamlet Program, which he interpreted as Nhu’s attempt to solidify his brother’s power base in the country.<sup>26</sup> While eventually supportive of the Strategic Hamlet Program, Thompson thought it expanded too quickly across the country (the Delta plan had called for a slow expansion in the Mekong), and resources for building strategic hamlets could not be allocated to satisfy demand. Unhappy with the results, he eventually repudiated any involvement in what the program had become.<sup>27</sup>

Despite his frustration, Thompson was shocked by the manner of Diem’s death.<sup>28</sup> As South Vietnam devolved into a cycle of military coups, the Americans were drawn ever further into supporting a series of new ARVN regimes. Concurrently, Thompson commented that many Americans were surprised by Kennedy’s involvement in Diem’s death, and consequently, Diem’s reputation had to be destroyed to protect Kennedy’s memory. “It was a great feast for the polemical jackals,” Thompson wrote.<sup>29</sup> “The carcass had to be mauled until there was nothing left.”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency*, 54.

<sup>25</sup> Thompson, *Make for the Hills*, 129.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 129-130.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

Diem remains a controversial figure, even in death, and this controversy is reflected in the existing historical scholarship. There are two sides of the spectrum: on one side are those historians who believe supporting Diem was disastrous. These writers maintain that support for Diem equated to support for a repressive tyrant whose policies created and fueled the communist insurgency in South Vietnam. On the other end of the spectrum are those who believe that Diem was a Vietnamese patriot. To this group, Diem encouraged South Vietnamese nationalism in order to create a functioning state from the debris of the French withdrawal.

Seth Jacob's *Cold War Mandarin* (2006) is indicative of the former school of thought. He wrote, "Washington's commitment to Diem may have been the most ruinous foreign policy decision of the postwar era."<sup>31</sup> Elsewhere in *Cold War Mandarin*, he commented:

None of America's Cold War allies did more to undermine the power and reputation of the United States than Ngo Dinh Diem. From 1954, when he became premier, to 1963, when he was assassinated, Diem ran South Vietnam as a police state while the United States bankrolled his tyranny.<sup>32</sup>

While Jacobs is critical of Diem, Jacobs based his criticism on secondary sources and American government documents. In *Cold War Mandarin*, Diem displayed independent agency, but his comments and his actions are always seen through the American perspective. That is, when Jacobs included Diem's comments or attitudes, they are comments and attitudes drawn from contemporary American reports and evaluations. Considering the references included in his footnotes and bibliographic essay, Jacobs did

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<sup>31</sup> Seth Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin: Ngo Dinh Diem and the Origins of America's War in Vietnam, 1950-1963* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006), 8.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.

not incorporate Vietnamese language sources. Therefore, he reached his conclusions by studying the South Vietnamese government through the attitudes and prejudices of American (and, from his source list, apparently only American) officials, diplomats, and military officers.

From these sources, Jacobs developed his opinion of the Strategic Hamlet Program. While acknowledging Diem's independence in establishing it without prior American approval,<sup>33</sup> Jacobs maintained, "Diem seemed less concerned with the peasants' needs or problems than with consolidating his rule in South Vietnam."<sup>34</sup> He wrote that the program forced the relocation of large numbers of peasants, who were required to leave ancestral homes for the defended perimeters of the new hamlets. While the program was also designed to be a conduit for government efforts to improve living conditions, Jacobs described it as more of a conduit for government money into the pockets of corrupt bureaucrats.<sup>35</sup> Despite the program's designs, and despite American financial support and the initial approval of Sir Robert Thompson (who, Jacobs wrote, later disavowed the program), *Cold War Mandarin* maintained that the program's poor implementation ironically acted as a Viet Cong recruiting drive.<sup>36</sup>

Other historians have reached conclusions that stand in marked contrast to Jacobs's findings. Mark Moyar's *Triumph Forsaken* (2006) and Geoffrey Shaw's *The Lost Mandate of Heaven* (2015) find Diem an effective Cold War warrior whose personal independence and nationalist credentials made him a viable alternative to leadership by

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<sup>33</sup> Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin*, 125.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

Ho Chi Minh and the North Vietnamese. Indeed, Moyar argued, “Supporting the coup of November 1963 was by far the worst American mistake of the Vietnam War.”<sup>37</sup> Shaw concurred:

Within a few weeks [of the November 1963 coup against Diem], any hope of a successful outcome in Vietnam—that is, of a free and democratic country friendly toward the United States—was extinguished. Truly, in order to solve a problem that did not exist, the Kennedy administration created a problem that could not be solved.<sup>38</sup>

Apart from a few Vietnamese oral interviews and secondary sources, Shaw reached his conclusions in much the same way as Jacobs: he relied overwhelmingly on American primary and secondary sources. So, despite reaching different conclusions, Shaw and Jacobs portray Diem and his government through an American lens. While Moyar, on the other hand, made greater use of Vietnamese sources, he, too, relied heavily on American accounts of the war. This suggests that dependence on American sources does not automatically equate to support (or opposition) to Diem and his policies. Rather, it suggests that the American and Vietnamese documents are read according to historians’ particular biases.

Perhaps predictably, Shaw and Moyar approved of Diem’s Strategic Hamlet Program, seeing it as a path to victory. Moyar found that by 1963, contemporary American assessments (while acknowledging the program’s shortcomings in establishing some hamlets too quickly) had succeeded in creating confidence in the GVN among the South Vietnamese peasantry.<sup>39</sup> He maintained that initially skeptical American and

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<sup>37</sup> Mark Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), xvii.

<sup>38</sup> Geoffrey Shaw, *The Lost Mandate of Heaven: The American Betrayal of Ngo Dinh Diem, President of Vietnam* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2015), 18.

<sup>39</sup> Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken*, 207.

British officials, namely Sir Robert Thompson, in South Vietnam eventually came round to supporting the program, recognizing its use in defeating the communist insurgency.<sup>40</sup>

Peter Busch's *All the Way with JFK?* (2003) examined the Diem era from the British perspective, and, based on government documents from Britain, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand, in addition to a selection of memoirs and secondary sources, concludes that Britain believed in America's domino theory.<sup>41</sup> Consequently, Whitehall supported BRIAM because it saw the advisory group as way of reassuring its Commonwealth allies in the Pacific and as a way of building the ARVN into an organization that could defeat the Viet Cong—something the British felt the Americans were incapable of doing.<sup>42</sup>

BRIAM found Diem an independent leader. Busch wrote, "Thompson as well as the Americans found it impossible to persuade President Diem to implement all elements of their advice,"<sup>43</sup> but he acknowledged that "Robert Thompson quickly overcame the initial difficulties with the American military and the US embassy in Saigon, and he established himself as one of the most important, if not the most important, foreign advisor to Diem's government."<sup>44</sup> In *All the Way with JFK?*, the Americans provided Diem with financial support, but the British gave the most influential advice, which conflicts, of course, with *Edward Lansdale: The Unquiet American* and *In the Midst of Wars*.

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<sup>40</sup> Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken*, 207-208.

<sup>41</sup> Busch, *All the Way with JFK?*, 199-200.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 202.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 201.



Busch based his assessment of relative influence on the apparent readiness of Diem and the Americans to listen to Thompson's advice.<sup>45</sup> That being said, Busch believed Thompson's actual influence on the Strategic Hamlet Program, which encompassed part of Thompson's Delta plan, was rather limited.<sup>46</sup> Busch wrote:

Thompson's advocacy of Malayan-type measures in Vietnam helped to pave the way for Washington's acceptance of the Strategic Hamlet Programme, yet it is conceivable that the South Vietnamese and the Americans would have pursued a similar policy in any case.<sup>47</sup>

Ultimately, while the British were initially reluctant to support the program for fear of being associated with a potential failure, they, and Thompson, soon backed it, despite acknowledging several flaws in the way the South Vietnamese were executing it.<sup>48</sup>

Whereas Thompson maintained the GVN was winning the war, Busch argued that Thompson was too quick to assume that the strategy the British used in the Malayan Emergency, particularly the strategic hamlet, could be grafted onto the situation in South Vietnam with similar results. Busch credits this hubris to "the fact that Thompson did not find it necessary to devise original anti-guerilla schemes to fit the Vietnamese situation."<sup>49</sup>

While other historians debated the degree of British or American influence in Saigon, Edward Miller's *Misalliance* (2013) and Philip Catton's *Diem's Final Failure* (2002) emphasized the agency and independence of Diem and his brother, Nhu. While Catton examined American secondary sources and government documents, he also

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<sup>45</sup> Busch, *All the Way with JFK?*, 201.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 202.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 202-203.

studied Vietnamese primary and secondary sources as well, some of which are from the Vietnamese National Archives II in Ho Chi Minh City. As compared to the historians discussed above, Catton incorporated the perspective of the South Vietnamese to a much greater degree; they are lead actors in the drama, not simply reacting to American or British cues.

Drawing on this Vietnamese source base, Catton examined the tensions between Diem and his American allies, arguing, “that the conflict in US-Vietnamese relations represented a clash between visions of national building and methods of modernizing South Vietnam.”<sup>50</sup> For Catton, this conflict culminated in the Strategic Hamlet Program, which he sees as a failed South Vietnamese nation building effort.<sup>51</sup> However, he acknowledged that Diem and Nhu’s intent in establishing the program was to create a secure, stable country possessing an ideological underpinning that rivaled or surpassed the appeal of communism. As such, they saw strategic hamlets as generating “a revolution in four areas: military, social, political, and economic.”<sup>52</sup> Through improvement in those four categories, the GVN would defeat the communist insurgency. Eventually, American efforts during the Abrams era would mirror many of the Ngo brothers’ goals in the Strategic Hamlet Program.

Catton believed Diem had an independent vision for his nation, and to accomplish it, the Ngo brothers, who, Catton writes, did not see the Malayan Emergency and South

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<sup>50</sup> Philip E. Catton, *Diem’s Final Failure: Prelude to America’s War in Vietnam* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 2.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

Vietnam as comparable situations,<sup>53</sup> played the British and American advisors in Saigon against one another:

British officials would report with increasing concern this yawning gap between their advice and the palace's policies. They suspected, as did US officials, that the Ngos flirted with BRIAM's proposals in order to stymie US attempts to promote an American plan of action and provide moral support for their own ideas.<sup>54</sup>

It would be Diem and Nhu's reluctance or refusal to listen to American advice, especially in regard to democratic reforms, that would convince some members of the Kennedy administration to support the November 1963 coup.<sup>55</sup>

Like Catton, Miller relied on extensive Vietnamese language sources to argue "that nation-building ideas and agenda played central roles in the formation, evolution, and eventual undoing of Washington's relationship with Diem."<sup>56</sup> BRIAM does not figure prominently in Miller's history. Rather, Miller noted that the Ngo brothers viewed much of the British advice, which was based on experience from the Malayan Emergency, "as inappropriate for Vietnam."<sup>57</sup> Instead, Miller wrote that Nhu was the driving force behind the program, and he drew from the French experience in Indochina and Algeria, not the British counterinsurgency model.<sup>58</sup> Like Catton, Miller emphasized that the South Vietnamese intent behind the Strategic Hamlet Program was to initiate a reform in Vietnamese society along several fronts, although Miller wrote it focused on social, political, and military reforms, leaving out Catton's economic reforms, which

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<sup>53</sup> Catton, *Diem's Final Failure*, 96.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 209-212.

<sup>56</sup> Miller, *Misalliance*, 12.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 232.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

Miller says were absent from the program.<sup>59</sup> If these reforms were implemented correctly, the Ngo brothers, especially Nhu, believed the results would lead to greater self-sufficiency for South Vietnam and less dependency on the United States.<sup>60</sup>

However, in the interim, they recognized the program would require American financial assistance, and with it, American advice. Many of the American advisors in Saigon saw the Strategic Hamlet Program in a different light than the Ngos. While Nhu envisioned it as a program to develop South Vietnamese self-sufficiency, the American military advisors saw it as means to control the population during ARVN offensives.<sup>61</sup> Meanwhile, the CIA believed the hamlets could be used as “a means to enlist the rural population in the fight against the [National Liberation Front (NLF)],”<sup>62</sup> the State Department viewed them as replicas of the Malayan Emergency villages, and finally, the US Agency for International Development considered the program as an opportunity to spread democracy in South Vietnam.<sup>63</sup>

Despite conflicting visions for the Strategic Hamlet Program, Miller concluded that for all the program’s shortcomings in execution, “it appeared to be part of a remarkable turnaround in the government’s fortunes in its war against the NLF.”<sup>64</sup> However, it also served as an example of the conflicting goals within the American advisory effort and between the Americans and the South Vietnamese. These conflicting visions for the future of the Republic of Vietnam would lead to the Ngo brothers’ deaths

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<sup>59</sup> Miller, *Misalliance*, 235-237.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 234.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 240.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 242.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 247.

and a deepening American commitment in blood and treasure to stop the spread of communism in Southeast Asia.

Sorley wrote that Abrams coordinated with the other American civilian departments and agencies in Vietnam to prosecute the 'one war' strategy and Vietnamization program. Arguably, this strategy was designed to join the conventional war with pacification efforts and to build the capacity of the ARVN and GVN to conduct independent operations.<sup>65</sup> However, the South Vietnamese were conducting independent operations during the Diem era, most prominently during the implementation of the Strategic Hamlet Program (1961-1963). While historians and participants are divided as to its results, nearly all agree the program showed an independent government seeking Vietnamese solutions to Vietnamese problems, all in the name of securing South Vietnam against communism.

At the same time, while historians and many of the participants agreed that the strategic hamlet was a Vietnamese program, they debated the extent of Diem's agency in developing it. This thesis draws from the State Department documents found in the *Foreign Relations of the United States* (FRUS) and records from BRIAM and the British Embassy in Saigon to support the work of Miller and Catton by arguing that Diem displayed remarkable independence in maneuvering around his foreign advisors to accomplish his own objectives, and it, therefore, disagrees with those that argue he was an American puppet. Various American and British diplomats, spies, and military advisors in South Vietnam and Washington, D.C. produced these documents to debate the merits and success of the various tactics, techniques, and strategies they

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<sup>65</sup> Sorley, *A Better War*, xii-xiii, 17-21.

recommended to President Diem. But if there is a reoccurring theme amongst these memorandums and reports, it is that the GVN was an independent entity that would not necessarily obey the recommendations of its source of military and financial support: the United States.

While Catton and Miller make similar assertions as to Diem's independence, this thesis builds on their work by emphasizing the role BRIAM played in Diem's political maneuvering. This thesis also extends on Catton and Miller's arguments by connecting their studies of Diem's presidency to the policies that Sorely maintained were implemented by Abrams during the latter half of America's direct involvement in the war. Sorely calls the period of Abrams' command the "better war," implying that the United States had finally found the right general to implement what might have been a winning strategy. This strategy centered on Vietnamization. However, the war had already been Vietnamized during Diem's presidency, and it was only direct American involvement in South Vietnam's internal politics that ended it.

Therefore, this thesis argues that Diem and his brother Nhu were independent leaders of South Vietnam who used BRIAM to manipulate the various American factions into supporting the Strategic Hamlet Program, which was an effort by the Ngos to solidify their control of the country. Diem's efforts represented a Vietnamese solution to the communist insurgency, one the Americans supported. Abrams's Vietnamization also represented American efforts to support Vietnamese solutions to winning the war. Therefore, Abrams's program was, at its heart, a repetition of the United States' strategy during the Diem era.

Similarly, Abrams's emphasis on winning the hearts and minds of the South Vietnamese people, as argued by Sorley, mirrored the plan BRIAM presented to Diem. While this plan offered a foreign endorsement of what the Ngos had been doing with the earlier construction of agrovilles, it also shows that what Sorely argued was Abrams's new strategy was actually a return to what had been done before. Consequently, the better war began not with Abrams but rather in 1961, when Sir Robert Thompson presented his Delta Plan to President Ngo Dinh Diem.

## CHAPTER II – ENTER THE AMERICANS: VIETNAM, 1954-1960

Disunity marked the American effort in South Vietnam from 1954 until Diem's death in 1963. The CIA, State Department, military advisors, and the American embassy in Saigon had competing agendas and ideas about the path to a successful and independent Republic of Vietnam, and these various entities often worked to cross-purposes. The disunity of effort led to significant friction amongst the important actors in the drama of the early 1960s, and ultimately, the Americans did not develop an understanding of the situation in South Vietnam that was shared across all the various groups operating in country. Certainly, Diem and Nhu would take advantage of American disunity. In the absence of a widely-agreed upon plan within the United States mission in Saigon, the Vietnamese president was able to use BRIAM to influence President Kennedy into supporting the Strategic Hamlet Program.

It is difficult to examine this period of American involvement in Southeast Asia without seeing it through the lens of what followed. The wisdom of hindsight reveals that the power vacuum created by Diem's fall in 1963 contributed to significant instability in the GVN and in the counterinsurgency efforts of its military, particularly ARVN. However, evaluating and judging the American actors of this period from the perspective of the present dismisses their contemporary concerns. The Americans working in Washington, D.C. or Saigon saw events in South Vietnam as part of the larger Cold War. While this global struggle against Communism was defined in the famous "Domino Theory," it was on the ground in places like Saigon that theory was transformed into action. What form that action took, though, was a matter of debate.



There were several primary American groups in Saigon during the period of the Strategic Hamlet Program (1961-1963). The personnel staffing these entities—particularly the CIA, the military, and the Foreign Service—built on the efforts of their predecessors, whose work, in turn, was influenced by a different reality than the one facing the Americans in the early 1960s. Consequently, the Americans in Saigon in 1961 operated within a political climate, and with Vietnamese leaders, that had evolved since the end of Indochina in the mid-1950s.

Examining the American effort during this period does not discount the agency of the South Vietnamese in determining their own destiny. Rather, it is to emphasize that the Americans worked within their own understanding of the situation as they saw it. As the principal financiers of the Diem regime—and as the ones bankrolling the ARVN—the Americans had an outsized influence in Saigon. This would be a source of tension between the Americans and the South Vietnamese president as Diem, after defeating several of the groups that competed with him for power, sought to assert his own independence and the sovereignty of his country. Indeed, he was determined that South Vietnam would remain an independent nation partnered with the Americans in as equal a fashion as possible. Diem and his family were resolute to the end in their efforts to show his people, and the world, that he was not an American puppet.

A brief history of the United States' involvement in South Vietnam is needed, therefore, to understand American motivations in supporting or condemning the Strategic Hamlet Program—and by extension, Diem's efforts to secure his country. All actors and factions within Saigon in the late 1950s and early 1960s made decisions built upon what came before, and within the story of Southeast Asia, the United States arrived relatively

late. Before them were hundreds of years of human habitation along the banks of the Mekong Delta and the slopes of the Annamese Mountains. Conflict between the Vietnamese and Chinese, or between the Vietnamese and Khmer, gave way in the 1800s to French control of not just Vietnam, but Cambodia and Laos as well, forming the colony of Indochina.<sup>66</sup>

In the 1950s and 60s, the Americans in Saigon would work under conditions set by French control of Indochina. Dividing Vietnam into three zones of control, Tonkin in the north, Annam in the center, and Cochinchina in the south, which contained Saigon and the Mekong Delta, the French ruled with varying degrees of intrusiveness. Tonkin and parts of Annam later became North Vietnam, while the rest of Annam and Cochinchina formed the basis of South Vietnam. Significantly, of the three regions, Cochinchina was the only one that had been directly administered by the French. The others, particularly Annam, were governed through local elites, who reported to the Vietnamese emperor in the central city of Huế.<sup>67</sup>

The French style of rule purposefully kept much of the key decision-making out of the hands of the Vietnamese. Consequently, there were few Vietnamese with significant experience administering anything bigger than a district or village, and within the colonial bureaucracy, there was an equal paucity of local nationals in any position that required significant management expertise.<sup>68</sup> As part of their colonial rule, the French also established a Vietnamese army, but like the civilian administration and

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<sup>66</sup> Ronald H Spector, *Advice and Support: The Early Years, 1941-1960* (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, 1985), 3-5.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 5-7.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 10-11.

bureaucracy, French nationals filled most of the key leadership positions.<sup>69</sup> The lack of experience and governing expertise within military and civilian ranks at country-level management would later complicate the Diem regime's efforts to administer the nation without significant outside support.

While France faced periodic Vietnamese opposition to its rule, and while the Japanese occupied Indochina for much of World War II, the most significant challenge to French control came in 1945, when Ho Chi Minh declared Vietnamese independence after the Japanese defeat, beginning a concentrated communist military campaign against the colonial occupiers. The United States had been involved in supporting Vietnamese guerillas against the Japanese, and the Americans were at first reticent to entangle themselves in French efforts to maintain control of Indochina. However, the 1948 fall of Nationalist China to the Chinese communists and the beginning of the Korean War in 1950 changed the way the Americans viewed events in Southeast Asia.<sup>70</sup> If the French were defeated in their colonial war—Washington concluded—communism might continue its march through Asia.

Over the course of the late 1940s and into the early 1950s, the United States steadily increased the amount of aid flowing to the French fighting in Indochina. With this aid came American advisors to assist in its administration and monitor the course of French operations against the insurgents.<sup>71</sup> This small group of American advisors—termed the Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) Indochina—was the genesis for

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<sup>69</sup> Miller, *Misalliance*, 89-90.

<sup>70</sup> Spector, *Advice and Support*, 77-104, 123.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 77-121.

what became the large-scale deployment of hundreds of thousands of American military and civilian personnel over the course of the 1960s and early 70s.

Despite American aid, the French were decisively defeated at the battle of Dien Bien Phu in May 1954. As part of the peace agreement that ended French control, Indochina was separated into Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. Vietnam was partitioned along the 17<sup>th</sup> Parallel into a communist north and noncommunist south, which eventually became the Republic of Vietnam, although it was often referred to as South Vietnam.<sup>72</sup> While the Vietnamese communists rapidly assumed control of their assigned portion, and the French made preparations to depart the south, the Americans made plans to stay. Ostensibly, MAAG Indochina continued operations in country to ensure the proper accountability of equipment that had been given to the French. However, MAAG's ranks were expanded in mid-1954 to allow for the advising of Vietnamese military training.<sup>73</sup> This mission was formally approved—and ranks expanded again—at the end of 1954, further cementing long-term American commitment to the survival of the new nation of South Vietnam against any possible communist aggression.

After the partition, however, the Americans in Saigon looked with dismay at the seemingly dominant communist control of North Vietnam and felt apprehensive about the future prospects of their new ally. Notwithstanding the communist threat, the presence of various armed factions within the Republic of Vietnam—all of which had a tenuous sense of loyalty to the new government in Saigon—did not auger success for the continued existence of a democratic south.

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<sup>72</sup> Spector, *Advice and Support*, 219.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 223.

In their efforts to fight the communist guerillas in Cochinchina, the French had armed and subsidized two Vietnamese religious groups, the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao, each of which maintained powerful private armies after the peace agreement.<sup>74</sup> Additionally, in 1954, the South Vietnamese emperor, Bao Dai, sold control of the Saigon police force to the Binh Xuyen mafia, which had also been subsidized by the French to fight the communists and additionally, controlled the city's vice industries of opium and prostitution.<sup>75</sup> These three factions exercised significant power over South Vietnam's rural and urban areas, proving a potential obstacle to the central government's efforts to enforce its writ.

The Vietnamese National Army later renamed the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, or ARVN, was the official armed force of the nation, and was, therefore, along with the national police, charged with maintaining the state's sovereignty. However, the ARVN's loyalties to the new South Vietnamese government were also tenuous. Many of the senior officers had little to no experience managing large units or complex operations, and ARVN's leader, General Nguyen Van Hinh, was a French citizen married to a French national, and he understandably wished to maintain continued close ties with France. He also spoke openly of overthrowing the new South Vietnamese leader who was seen as close to the Americans, which called into question Hinh's loyalty to the state.<sup>76</sup>

Facing the communists and the armed factions within South Vietnam was its new leader, Ngo Dinh Diem, a devout, monk-like Catholic, a workaholic, and a Vietnamese

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<sup>74</sup> Jessica Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and 1950s Southern Vietnam* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), 38.

<sup>75</sup> Miller, *Misalliance*, 93.

<sup>76</sup> Spector, *Advice and Support*, 233.

nationalist.<sup>77</sup> Neither a communist nor a supporter of the French, Diem spent some years in the United States as a political exile, where his anticommunism and staunch Catholicism brought him to the attention of several politically influential Americans.<sup>78</sup> Indeed, after his ascent to power in 1954, the US State Department initially viewed him as the only local option available to prevent a communist takeover of South Vietnam.<sup>79</sup>

Diem, with American backing, quickly moved to establish control of his country. Through political maneuvering, he managed to isolate Hinh from the support of the other three factions, and towards the end of 1954, Diem was able to remove the general from control of the American-funded ARVN.<sup>80</sup> After Hinh fled to exile in Paris, Diem turned his sights on the Binh Xuyen, Cao Dai, and Hoa Hao. Through a combination of realpolitik maneuvering and combat operations with the now more loyal ARVN, which engaged in successful street fighting in Saigon against the Binh Xuyen army, Diem was able to defeat his South Vietnamese opponents and remove Bao Dai from his position as head of state by the end of 1955.<sup>81</sup> With the emperor gone, Diem made the presidency the official leading political position in the Republic of Vietnam.<sup>82</sup>

Having plenty of enemies and few friends in South Vietnam itself, Diem had turned to his family to help him win control of the country, and this dependency continued once he emerged victorious from the domestic power struggle of 1954-1955. His reliance on his family to help govern the country would become a hallmark of his

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<sup>77</sup> Miller, *Misalliance*, 24-26.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 27-41.

<sup>79</sup> Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance*, 200.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 81-83.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 11-12.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 146-172.

regime for the duration of its existence. It would also become a source of frustration for some anti-Diem Americans who saw it as corrupt, undemocratic nepotism.

The Viet Minh had killed his eldest brother in 1945, so Diem leaned on the remaining four. Ngo Dinh Thuc was a Catholic bishop who generated support for Diem within Vietnam's Catholic population.<sup>83</sup> Ngo Dinh Can oversaw the family interests in their home city of Hué and built a network of support in Annam.<sup>84</sup> Ngo Dinh Luyen was a former classmate of Emperor Bao Dai, and Luyen had proved a useful intermediary with the imperial throne when Diem was initially maneuvering for the Vietnamese premiership in 1954, shortly after the fall of Dien Bien Phu.<sup>85</sup> Of all Diem's brothers, though, the most powerful was Ngo Dinh Nhu.

Nhu considered himself a philosopher and an intellectual. He was educated in French universities, which gave him—like many of Vietnam's intellectuals—a distaste for what he considered the uncultured representatives of America and the United Kingdom.<sup>86</sup> Nhu was often quick to point out Americans' lack of understanding of Vietnamese culture. Such was the case when he explained an American faux pas to the American Chief of the Pacific Command while Nhu was en route to the United States for an official visit. The confused American admiral quickly sent a telegram to the general in charge of MAAG Indochina, wiring:

At dinner last night [in Honolulu] Vietnam Special Ambassador and brother of the President, Ngo Dinh Nhu, told me that the Communists make fun of president whose name is Ngo Dinh Diem because Americans call him "President Diem" thus using his first name Diem and not his family name Ngo which is equivalent to calling President

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<sup>83</sup> Miller, *Misalliance*, 26-27.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 42, 51-53,

<sup>86</sup> Catton, *Diem's Final Failure*, 29.

Eisenhower “President Dwight” whereas Americans most always call the Communist leader Ho Chi Minh by his last name Ho which is much more respectable. He should be called Ambassador Ngo and not Ambassador Nhu.<sup>87</sup>

While the head of MAAG replied that Nhu was mistaken—that in fact, it was rather common for the Vietnamese to refer to their leaders by their first name—it remains that Nhu and the Americans had differing opinions as to what the Vietnamese people thought and felt.<sup>88</sup> It is possible, too, to sense the frustration of both the Americans and Nhu in their dealings with one another; theirs was not a harmonious relationship. This frustration would eventually boil over in 1963 when the Americans backed the coup that killed Diem and Nhu.

One source of this friction, though, was that Nhu, despite being advised by the CIA, was not beholden to the Americans for power, although the CIA did provide funding for the Can Lao—South Vietnam’s ruling political party.<sup>89</sup> Instead, Nhu’s political power derived from his position as head of the southern faction of the Can Lao and the country’s intelligence apparatus.<sup>90</sup> While Diem’s brother Ngo Dinh Can oversaw

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<sup>87</sup> *Foreign Relations of the United States* (hereafter referred to as *FRUS*), 1955-1957, Vietnam, Volume I, eds. Edward C. Keefer and David W. Mabon (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1985), Document 362. Accessed September 21<sup>st</sup>, 2016. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1955-57v01/d362>.

<sup>88</sup> *FRUS*, 1955-1957, Vietnam, Volume I, eds. Edward C. Keefer and David W. Mabon (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1985), Document 363. Accessed September 28<sup>th</sup>, 2016. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1955-57v01/d363>.

<sup>89</sup> Thomas L. Ahern, Jr., *CIA and the House of Ngo: Covert Action in South Vietnam, 1954-63* (Washington, D.C.: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2000), 32. Accessed November 28<sup>th</sup>, 2016.

<sup>90</sup> Catton, *Diem’s Final Failure*, 16.

*FRUS*, 1958-1960, Vietnam, Volume I, eds. Edward C. Keefer and David W. Mabon (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1986), Document 263. Accessed September 28<sup>th</sup>, 2016. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1958->



the other, relatively cohesive Can Lao organization located in Hué, in the northern region of South Vietnam, several other sub-factions existed within Nhu's southern wing of the Can Lao headquartered in Saigon, not all of which followed him.<sup>91</sup> While Nhu was certainly the most powerful Can Lao member in Saigon, his control of that particular wing of the party was—from the American perspective—not complete. However, this did not stop the United States from seeing Nhu as a source of the regime's sometimes heavy-handed response to internal opposition, and some American officials in Saigon thought he should be removed from power.<sup>92</sup>

During the Strategic Hamlet Program, the Can Lao would be used to help spread support for the Diem regime in the villages of South Vietnam. The party's full name was the Can Lao Nhan – Vi Cach Mang Dang, which translates to the Party of the Worker and Personalism. Founded in 1950 by Nhu, the Can Lao was modeled on both the Kuomintang and the Communist Party, adopting the latter's use of cells and cadres to project power and influence. The Can Lao also copied the centralized structure of both organizations, going so far as to use the communists' principle of democratic centralization, in which final authority rested with party leaders.<sup>93</sup>

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60v01/d263. This document discusses Nhu's role as the head of the Can Lao apparatus based in Saigon.

<sup>91</sup> *FRUS*, 1958-1960, Vietnam, Volume I, Document 263.

*FRUS*, 1958-1960, Vietnam, Volume I, eds. Edward C. Keefer and David W. Mabon (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1986), Document 56. Accessed September 29<sup>th</sup>, 2016. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1958-60v01/d56>.

<sup>92</sup> *FRUS*, 1958-1960, Vietnam, Volume I, eds. Edward C. Keefer and David W. Mabon (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1986), Document 197. Accessed October 19<sup>th</sup>, 2016. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1958-60v01/d197>.

<sup>93</sup> *FRUS*, 1958-1960, Vietnam, Volume I, Document 56.

The US Embassy studied the party and estimated that it was 16,000 strong. With members located in positions of political and economic power throughout South Vietnam, it engaged in business practices both legal and suspect, and embassy reports note that “It appears that few important business transactions occur in Viet-Nam without some benefit to the Can Lao.”<sup>94</sup> While the embassy speculated that the money from these transactions was typically used to support Can Lao activities, it also reported rumors that Nhu, but not Diem, was growing unfairly rich on the trade, possibly damaging the family’s reputation in the eyes of the Vietnamese people.<sup>95</sup>

The embassy also evaluated the perceived weaknesses of the party:

The Can Lao has no one leader. It is set up to be run as an authoritarian organization, but authority is actually divided between the President, Nhu and Can. Although Diem could exercise full authority, he devotes his chief attention to security and economic problems. However, he is understandably unwilling to grant complete authority to anyone else to run the Can Lao. Nhu is best placed to run the party for the President but does not have complete authority from the President and certainly, his writ does not run to Hue which is under the tight hand of Can.<sup>96</sup>

While Nhu was nominally the Can Lao’s national chairman, the embassy speculated that the absence of a clear party leader “evidently suits the President as a means of maintaining an equilibrium between the two brothers and prevents either from becoming too powerful.”<sup>97</sup> From the perspective of the US Foreign Service personnel in Saigon, then, while the Can Lao was a powerful apparatus, it lacked the true cohesion of the Communist Party on which it was modeled. Regardless, the party provided the Diem regime with a base of support within the country, and it was one of the means by which

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<sup>94</sup> *FRUS*, 1958-1960, Vietnam, Volume I, Document 56.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

the Ngos would attempt to spread the doctrine of Personalism through the Strategic Hamlet Program. However, the party—despite receiving clandestine support from the CIA—also proved a lightning rod for American criticism of the Ngos’ autocratic methods, exacerbating the tensions within the United States mission between those who supported the South Vietnamese president and those who did not. Diem, in turn, used BRIAM to exploit these American tensions in order to gain the United States’ support for the Strategic Hamlet Program.

Indeed, the Can Lao was a cause of concern for the US Embassy and a topic of conversation between Diem and Elbridge Durbrow, the American Ambassador in Saigon in the late 1950s. Durbrow reported that while he had no objections to the Can Lao’s role in running the country, he was concerned that its efforts to coordinate South Vietnam’s developments might—through autocracy and corruption—do more harm than good.<sup>98</sup> In the same report, Durbrow noted that Diem complained that he was developing a reputation in America for “being too arbitrary, dictatorial and ‘undemocratic’”.<sup>99</sup> According to Durbrow, Diem blamed his declining reputation on American journalists who, after spending only a day or two in country, filed articles filled with scandalous gossip and rumor picked up from the bars and cafes of Saigon.<sup>100</sup> Durbrow concluded in his telegram that Diem was also concerned that the Can Lao was being portrayed as a nefarious covert force within South Vietnam.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> *FRUS*, 1958-1960, Vietnam, Volume I, eds. Edward C. Keefer and David W. Mabon (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1986), Document 35. Accessed September 29<sup>th</sup>, 2016. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1958-60v01/d35>.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

The party's shadowy nature seems to have bothered American diplomats. Looking in from the outside, embassy analysts, perhaps prevented by security concerns from coordinating with CIA analysts who also studied the party, struggled to discern the true source of power within the Can Lao, a party with aspirations towards centralized control but which to the Americans appeared as a collection of factions dominated by several members of the Ngo family. While the Americans acknowledged that Diem was the head of state, their reports presented a confusing array of groups within the government's power structure, suggesting they believed that Diem's power was not unassailable.

However, while the Can Lao existed independent from ARVN, embassy reports noted that "Recently the Can Lao, acting through its Military Committee, has begun to recruit some key officers in the military establishment probably in order to establish a control mechanism within the only organization strong enough to challenge the Government. Certain tensions have resulted."<sup>102</sup> One report also observed that ARVN was the only organization in South Vietnam with the power to overthrow Diem and the Ngo family, and consequently, the report reasoned, Diem would prevent Can Lao activities that might instigate a military backlash.

Despite assumptions of Diem's caution, the report also noticed that many ARVN officers saw membership in the Can Lao as a prerequisite for promotion or desirable assignments. There was notable concern within the embassy and ARVN that officers returning from training schools in the United States were being passed over for key

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<sup>102</sup> *FRUS*, 1958-1960, Vietnam, Volume I, Document 56.

positions due to their perceived association with the Americans.<sup>103</sup> The report observed, however, that American military advisors believed that most, if not all, the promotions were based not on party loyalty but merit, and indeed, MAAG had recommended many of them. These American advisors reported that any link between an officer's membership in the Can Lao was incidental, and any concerns about too-rapid promotions had to be weighed against the hard reality of ARVN's dearth of experienced senior leadership. Officers had to be found to fill key roles in the military hierarchy, and consequently, allegations of favoritism were bound to surface—the advisors maintained—as soldiers were promoted to fill vacancies in the chain of command. The Americans concluded in this report from 1959 that they had not observed any decrease in military efficiency from perceived actions of the Can Lao. The advisors stated that they were trying to share this point of view with their ARVN counterparts; the Americans did not report if their efforts were successful.<sup>104</sup>

The advisors' report recognized the underlying tension between ARVN and the political apparatus that Diem used to assert power throughout the country. Despite the efforts of American military advisors to explain to their ARVN counterparts that the promotion system was merit based, it seems the split between the South Vietnamese military and civilian government persisted, at least from the American embassy perspective. To Foreign Service officials, the root of this tension was the efforts of Diem, Nhu, and the Can Lao (a party supported by the CIA, another element of the American mission) to extend their influence into ARVN.

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<sup>103</sup> *FRUS*, 1958-1960, Vietnam, Volume I, Document 56.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

During the Strategic Hamlet Program, the Can Lao would be used to help spread the party's doctrine of Personalism, which the Ngos believed was an alternative to communism and liberal democracy.<sup>105</sup> Derived from the ideas of a French Catholic philosopher, Personalism sought to balance the collectivism championed by the communists with the free markets advocated by capitalism by spreading the idea that the individual—the most important element of society—can only reach his or her potential within beneficial social and economic contexts.<sup>106</sup>

The ideas of Personalism were not fully understood by embassy analysts, although an embassy dispatch from 1958 attempted an in-depth description. In the dispatch, the analyst noted that in this philosophy, “the Human Person is endowed with natural rights and duties, and that respect for these rights and fulfillment of these duties would result in a social order where the individual enjoys true political and economic freedom.”<sup>107</sup> The report continued by describing Personalism as a blend of the “essence of Western civilization” with “the cultural inheritance of Africa and Asia,” stressing the importance of dignity in human and governmental interactions.<sup>108</sup> The analyst used nebulous terms in an attempt to describe a philosophy that was—by virtue of the fact that it evokes nebulous terms—perhaps too vague to arouse widespread popular acceptance as an alternative, third way that would enable South Vietnam to defeat communism and at the same time, avoid the moral corruption of Western capitalism.

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<sup>105</sup> *FRUS*, 1958-1960, Vietnam, Volume I, eds. Edward C. Keefer and David W. Mabon (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1986), Document 45. Accessed October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2016. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1958-60v01/d45>.

<sup>106</sup> *FRUS*, 1958-1960, Vietnam, Volume I, Document 56.

<sup>107</sup> *FRUS*, 1958-1960, Vietnam, Volume I, Document 45.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

However, there were attempts by the South Vietnamese leadership to transform ethereal ideas into practical realities. Through the tenets of Personalism, Nhu advocated the allocation of a plot of land to all Vietnamese families. There were several rationales behind this plan, which presumably influenced the Strategic Hamlet Program years later. The embassy analyst reporting Nhu's idea believed that this land would provide the basis for personal dignity as well as wealth that could be used for industrial investment. And, as South Vietnam industrialized, the land grant would conceivably prevent the spread of communism by providing economic support for what might otherwise be a poor urban proletariat.<sup>109</sup>

Despite the seemingly egalitarian impulses of Personalism and Nhu's plan, the motives behind them were ambiguous to Foreign Service personnel in Saigon. The embassy report continued with the observation that it was unclear to Americans in Saigon if the Ngo brothers' actions were driven by a faithful adherence to Personalism or if they used the philosophy to legitimize what might otherwise be autocratic tactics. Expressing his concern in writing, the analyst commented: "For example, are people encouraged to move into the PMS and the Plaine des Jones, taking up small plots of land for family use as described by Nhu, because it is a wise plan, in consonance [with?] Personalist doctrines, or are Personalist doctrines merely invoked in order to help achieve and help justify the plan?"<sup>110</sup>

The analyst noted that few Vietnamese—beyond Diem and Nhu—seemed to understand Personalism. When questioned, Vietnamese officials typically repeated

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<sup>109</sup> *FRUS*, 1958-1960, Vietnam, Volume I, Document 45.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.* What the analyst was specifically referring to with the acronym 'PMS' is unclear, but presumably it is a region in South Vietnam.

official party lines instead of providing a more detailed explanation.<sup>111</sup> The analyst concluded his report with the pessimistic, “The various economic and social problems for which Marxians claim they have ready answers still remain basically unanswered in Personalist doctrine. There seems little popular acceptance of Personalism.”<sup>112</sup>

Personalism—the doctrine the Ngos planned to offer the South Vietnamese as an alternative to communism—seemed little understood by any beyond Diem and Nhu, but it was to be the doctrine the Strategic Hamlet Program would attempt to spread. The Americans writing the embassy reports also appear perplexed by this seemingly vague philosophy championed by a faction-ridden ruling party. From the American embassy perspective, despite the allegations of autocracy leveled at Diem, the South Vietnamese political scene was opaque and impenetrable.

The American mission in Saigon, however, was itself far from coherent in its actions and policy towards the Diem regime. Different groups within the mission pursued different means of achieving the desired goal of a non-communist South Vietnam, as exemplified by the CIA’s support of the Can Lao, a party the embassy accused of being undemocratic and that American military advisors were concerned was undermining ARVN’s combat effectiveness. Diem would later use BRIAM to exploit these kinds of divisions to gain American support for his own nationalist agenda, such as the implementation of the Strategic Hamlet Program.

The United States mission was roughly divided into three principal groups: the embassy, the military advisors, and the intelligence community—particularly the CIA.

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<sup>111</sup> *FRUS*, 1958-1960, Vietnam, Volume I, Document 45.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*



While the heads of each of these groups influenced the way their respective entity articulated its policies and positions, the central leadership in Washington, D.C. provided the general direction of the American position towards the government of South Vietnam. The leaders of the military, embassy and intelligence apparatus in Saigon changed over the years of American involvement, and consequently, while the embassy might pursue one course of action or use a specific set of techniques under one ambassador, embassy efforts might shift under another. So, too, with the other two groups. And throughout the course of the United States' involvement in South Vietnam, officials in Washington, D.C. attempted to influence events within the larger Cold War context.

This larger context included the prevalent political mentality of the day: the Domino Theory. This theory, first articulated during the administration of President Eisenhower, originally maintained that if Indochina, and then South Vietnam, went communist, the rest of Southeast Asia would follow. Under President Kennedy, the Domino Theory was modified. His advisors believed that if South Vietnam were to fall to communism, other democratic countries in Southeast Asia might not follow suit, but American global prestige would suffer nonetheless. The Kennedy administration believed that other nations around the world would lose faith in the ability of the United States to protect them, threatening the stability of democratic nations located outside the territorial confines of Southeast Asia.<sup>113</sup> The threat of diminished American prestige—which was detrimental to the United States' efforts to contain the communist menace—colored the perspective of the Americans assisting the South Vietnamese.

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<sup>113</sup> Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), 31.

Despite the shared belief of many within the American community in Saigon of the necessity of preventing communism's spread in the Republic of Vietnam, key officials within the mission differed as to whether Diem was the local leader up to the task. Rufus Phillips, who later led American efforts to support the Strategic Hamlet Program, noted that under Elbridge Durbrow, American ambassador to South Vietnam from 1957 until May of 1961, the American mission was divided between the ambassador—who disliked Diem—and the chief military advisor, first Lieutenant General Samuel Williams and then Lieutenant General Lionel McGarr, who had a relatively positive relationship with the South Vietnamese president.<sup>114</sup> The stark contrast between the two camps in their relationship with Diem was thrown into relief after a failed ARVN military coup in 1960.

While Diem prevailed against the paratroopers who tried to overthrow him, the Americans believed that, in the aftermath of the coup, Diem had grown suspicious of the possible involvement of the United States in the attempt to unseat him from power. Within this atmosphere of paranoia, Durbrow sent a telegram to the Department of State recommending that President Eisenhower not congratulate Diem on his regime's survival. Durbrow listed his rationale:

Several considerations lead me to recommend strongly against the President's sending Diem congratulations.

Principal reasons are:

1. Inadvisability of American President's [sic] again identifying himself with Diem until Diem shows clear signs of grasping and heeding lessons of coup;

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<sup>114</sup> Rufus Phillips, *Why Vietnam Matters: An eyewitness account of lessons not learned* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2008), 101.

2. Intemperate declarations of “Peoples Committee Against Communists and Rebels,” an organization of GVN officials, which has accused American, French and British “imperialists and colonialists” of having encouraged revolt; and
3. Fact congratulations now might detract from stern attitude we may soon have to take toward Diem.<sup>115</sup>

In general, Durbrow felt that Diem needed to expand his support base, primarily by loosening the Ngo family’s hold on government. However, Diem was reluctant to do so as he believed there were few in Vietnam outside his family and the Vietnamese Catholic community that he could trust.<sup>116</sup>

Other American officials believed Durbrow was unfairly biased against Diem and that this bias clouded his judgment of the situation. Lansdale, assigned to the Pentagon after leaving his CIA assignment in Vietnam in 1956, provided commentary on the 1960 failed coup to the US Secretary of Defense. In his memorandum, Lansdale observed that many of the officers and soldiers that revolted had had close ties to the Americans. Consequently, Lansdale believed that Diem might “mistrust large segments of the armed forces and, possibly, the utility of the way MAAG advisors are placed with Vietnamese units,” and this could result in Diem assuming more direct control of the ARVN.<sup>117</sup> If this were to occur, Lansdale recommended, then MAAG advisors should work to assume a greater role in advising Diem, at the expense of the State Department’s influence.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> *FRUS*, 1958-1960, Vietnam, Volume I, eds. Edward C. Keefer and David W. Mabon (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1986), Document 246. Accessed October 3rd, 2016. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1958-60v01/d246>.

<sup>116</sup> Spector, *Advice and Support*, 366-367.

<sup>117</sup> *FRUS*, 1958-1960, Vietnam, Volume I, eds. Edward C. Keefer and David W. Mabon (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1986), Document 230. Accessed October 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2016. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1958-60v01/d230>.

<sup>118</sup> *FRUS*, 1958-1960, Vietnam, Volume I, Document 230.

Lansdale wrote that he thought that the lesson Diem should take from the failed coup was to “change his ways,” but Lansdale was also concerned that Durbrow was not up to the task of advising Diem towards loosening his hold on the reins of power.<sup>119</sup> Commenting on Durbrow’s relationship with Diem, Lansdale noted that the task of encouraging Diem to “change his ways” typically fell to the US ambassador. However, Lansdale felt that the South Vietnamese president did not trust Durbrow, and perhaps, Lansdale maintained, Diem even felt that Durbrow had—through public remarks—encouraged the revolt in the first place.<sup>120</sup> “Thus,” Lansdale concluded, “it would be useful to get Durbrow out of Saigon. A graceful way would be to have him come home to report.”<sup>121</sup>

Lansdale and Durbrow had not seen eye-to-eye before the coup. Several months before the 1960 coup attempt, Durbrow had sent a telegram to the State Department to give his opinion of Lansdale’s ability to add value to American advisory efforts. Durbrow commented that he believed Diem wished to have Lansdale in Saigon because Diem thought Lansdale might get the embassy to back off its demands for a more inclusive South Vietnamese government. However, Durbrow was concerned that Lansdale had been too long from South Vietnam to provide effective advice.<sup>122</sup> Ultimately, Durbrow, acknowledging that Diem did not always listen to him, decided a Lansdale visit might prove useful if several conditions were met: Lansdale was to follow

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<sup>119</sup> *FRUS*, 1958-1960, Vietnam, Volume I, Document 230.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>122</sup> *FRUS*, 1958-1960, Vietnam, Volume I, eds. Edward C. Keefer and David W. Mabon (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1986), Document 163. Accessed October 4<sup>th</sup>, 2016. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1958-60v01/d163>.

orders from the ambassador, report everything that was said between himself and Diem, and not to exceed 60 days in country.<sup>123</sup> Writing to his superiors in Washington, Durbrow commented, “I do not know Lansdale well enough to make firm judgment re his effectiveness under present circumstances, but if you believe worth trying, I concur.”<sup>124</sup>

After the 1960 coup attempt, these two important actors—possessing various levels of perceived trust from Diem—argued the possibilities of the failed coup’s aftermath. While noting that Diem believed some Americans had supported the coup attempt, Durbrow concluded that the situation in South Vietnam was dire, especially with regard to US interests in the country and the region. He believed the communist insurgency controlled large parts of the country, had only gained in strength, and that the Diem regime’s autocratic methods were proving ineffectual to stem the rising violence. The only way for the South Vietnamese president to improve the situation, Durbrow reasoned, was for Diem to improve ARVN’s performance and increase his base of support within the country.<sup>125</sup> Looking ahead, Durbrow wrote to Washington that the United States “should help and encourage [Diem] to take effective action. Should he not do so, we may well be forced, in not too distant future, to undertake difficult task of identifying and supporting alternate leadership. This is not for discussion with foreign governments.”<sup>126</sup> Lansdale’s ideas as expressed in his memorandum agreed with

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<sup>123</sup> *FRUS*, 1958-1960, Vietnam, Volume I, Document 163.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>125</sup> *FRUS*, 1958-1960, Vietnam, Volume I, eds. Edward C. Keefer and David W. Mabon (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1986), Document 257. Accessed October 4<sup>th</sup>, 2016. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1958-60v01/d257>.

<sup>126</sup> *FRUS*, 1958-1960, Vietnam, Volume I, Document 257.

Durbrow's sentiments (with the exception of Diem's removal), but Lansdale did not think that Durbrow was the one to help Diem make the necessary changes.<sup>127</sup>

While Durbrow returned to the United States in 1961, the conflict between the ambassador and Lansdale was indicative of many of the conflicts occurring within the American effort to support the Vietnamese. Many of these conflicts were rooted in tensions between officials in Washington and personnel on the ground in Saigon, or amongst the different groups within the American mission to South Vietnam. At their source, these tensions typically arose from different viewpoints regarding how best to advise Diem and fight the communist insurgency, as well as whether Diem and the Ngo family were the right leaders for South Vietnam.

In the Department of State records, American officials discuss the extent that Diem used the American squabbling to his advantage. Lansdale, who believed he had a good rapport with the South Vietnamese president, was involved in many of the American bureaucratic tensions of the late 1950s, from his position in the Pentagon where he served primarily as the Deputy Director, Office of Special Operations, Office of the Secretary of Defense from 1957 until 1963.<sup>128</sup> In this role, Lansdale helped supervise the activities of the clandestine agencies, and as many of the records of these organizations are still classified, his memorandums and telegraphs from this period provide insight into the thinking and activities of the intelligence community.<sup>129</sup> He believed in the ability of the Vietnamese to help themselves, but he often assumed an

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<sup>127</sup> *FRUS*, 1958-1960, Vietnam, Volume I, Document 230.

<sup>128</sup> Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars*, 377.

<sup>129</sup> Cecil B. Currey, "Introduction," in *In the Midst of Wars: An American's Mission to Southeast Asia* by Edward Lansdale (New York: Fordham University Press, 1991), xiii.

attitude of superiority towards those he thought he was helping. Indeed, Lansdale once wrote “There is the way the rest of the world does things. And then there is the Vietnamese way.”<sup>130</sup> He elaborated by stating that this “Vietnamese way” could twist how foreigners conceived of problems and solutions in Southeast Asia.<sup>131</sup> Lansdale, however, was determined to spread the ideals of democracy, commenting, “You should know one thing at the beginning: I took my American beliefs with me into these Asian struggles, as Tom Paine would have done.”<sup>132</sup>

In early 1960, Diem requested that Lansdale return to South Vietnam to advise him on the current situation. Durbrow questioned Diem’s ostensible purpose for the visit, writing in a telegram to the Department of State, “Do not believe Diem desires him as much as advisor anti-guerrilla activities, but hopes use “old sympathetic friend” to reverse pressure Dept and Embassy putting on Diem to take what we consider needed steps his and our interests.”<sup>133</sup> Despite sharing the same goal of a democratic South Vietnam, conversations like this between officials in Saigon and their bosses in Washington revealed a disconnect in the methods necessary to achieve that goal, and they show a level of distrust with the South Vietnamese leadership. Key Americans in Saigon assumed that Diem’s motives were—if not nefarious—at least designed to take advantage of what even Americans saw as fractures within their own ranks.

The Americans were uncertain about their South Vietnamese allies, and they were uncertain about themselves. When the Strategic Hamlet Program was launched by the

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<sup>130</sup> Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars*, 244.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>132</sup> Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars*, xxxi.

<sup>133</sup> *FRUS*, 1958-1960, Vietnam, Volume I, Document 163.

South Vietnamese in 1962, it was done so within an environment of competing American voices, which Diem and the Ngo family attempted to navigate while preserving their nation's sovereignty, fight the communists, secure American military and economic aid, and—most importantly for the Ngos—remain in power. BRIAM's arrival provided Diem with the perfect opportunity to maneuver these competing American factions into supporting his agenda for consolidating control of South Vietnam.



### CHAPTER III – VIETNAM, 1961: SETTING THE STAGE FOR THE STRATEGIC HAMLET PROGRAM

The British in Saigon did not always agree with their American counterparts. Invited by President Diem, the small British Advisory Mission arrived in 1961 to provide advice to the Republic of Vietnam's counterinsurgency campaign.<sup>134</sup> "Small" is an understatement; BRIAM consisted of five advisors, and it was dwarfed by an American mission numbering in the thousands.<sup>135</sup> Through the personal charisma of BRIAM's leader, Sir Robert Thompson, however, the British advisors gained a disproportionate amount of influence with both the Americans and South Vietnamese. The Diem government, for its part, often used BRIAM in attempts to manipulate the Americans, while Thompson influenced the United States' mission in South Vietnam by working through Washington powerbrokers. Although the Strategic Hamlet Program was ultimately a South Vietnamese planned and executed program, Thompson was instrumental in securing American support—although he eventually disavowed it while the Americans did not.

BRIAM's collective résumé for advising the South Vietnamese rested on its members' experience in the Malayan Emergency, in which a British force had, over several years, managed to defeat a rural communist insurgency.<sup>136</sup> Consequently, BRIAM claimed it possessed unique knowledge in fighting an enemy like the Viet Cong.

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<sup>134</sup> Busch, *All the Way with JFK?*, 7.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>136</sup> The Malayan Emergency took place on the Malay Peninsula, which was part of British Malaya and is currently part of the post-colonial nation of Malaysia.

Despite past British success, however, even President Diem acknowledged that Malaya and South Vietnam had little in common beyond guerilla war.

Notwithstanding the differences between the two conflicts, BRIAM moved to support Diem's government, stepping into the political milieu of the Republic of Vietnam. In Saigon, the Americans' internal dysfunction combined with South Vietnamese political maneuvering to create a confusing array of factions and competing personalities. While the United Kingdom and the United States were allies, the UK—in post-World War II economic decline—was unable and perhaps unwilling to provide the financial aid the Americans showered on the Diem government. BRIAM, as a result, became an example of the UK's efforts to maintain its global influence and relevance after losing much of its empire. At the same time, Thompson was convinced the American and South Vietnamese counterinsurgency effort could be improved.

Prior to 1961, ARVN had pursued a largely conventional military approach to fighting the insurgency. Under the influence of MAAG, South Vietnamese forces, armed to fight a tank-wielding North Vietnamese military, swept through the countryside to kill or capture communist insurgents. BRIAM, in contrast, advocated for the implementation of the methods used in Malaya. Namely, Thompson argued that, after ARVN clearance operations, Vietnamese villages should be secured and local villagers trained to defend themselves, in conjunction with a paramilitary police force.

The Americans were initially resentful of BRIAM's efforts to encourage Diem to use the US-funded ARVN to achieve British-advised goals. Thompson, however, helped sway the Americans to support what eventually became the Strategic Hamlet Program. This program, while launched by the Diem government independent of BRIAM's advice,

was a South Vietnamese plan to win the hearts and minds of the rural people. Although backed by foreigners, the creation of strategic hamlets was Diem's attempt to win the war while maintaining his independence from his American advisors.

In the aftermath of World War II, the United Kingdom lost an empire. Struggling to adjust to the post-war, post-colonial international order, Britain worked to develop ways to maintain its global influence, exert its leadership of the Commonwealth, and develop its alliance with the United States. In 1956, the Suez Crisis highlighted the UK's limitations in the new world order. After occupying the Suez Canal, British forces had withdrawn in the face of political pressure from the US, the UN, and many of the Commonwealth countries. The withdrawal demonstrated to Her Majesty's Government that its political power in world affairs was significantly diminished from its pre-war glory days. It also showed the British that they would need US support if their overseas actions were to be successful.<sup>137</sup> BRIAM's establishment, therefore, was an extension of the UK's search for its new role in global politics.

Regionally, British involvement in South Vietnam must be seen from the perspective of the UK's interest in Singapore, Malaya, and the other Commonwealth countries of Oceania and Southeast Asia. During World War II, many of the Commonwealth countries and British colonies in the Pacific felt the UK's focus on the war in Europe had left them unfairly open to Japanese aggression.<sup>138</sup> Within that context, the United Kingdom supported American involvement in South Vietnam because it believed that if the Republic of Vietnam were to fall, it would hasten the spread of

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<sup>137</sup> Philippa Levine, *The British Empire: Sunrise to Sunset* (Harlow, England: Pearson Longman, 2007), 199-200.

<sup>138</sup> Levine, 197.

communism amongst the former British colonies in the region.<sup>139</sup> Britain recognized, too, that it lacked the resources the United States was able to bring to bear to support the Diem government in Saigon.<sup>140</sup>

However, what Britain did possess was recent experience fighting a communist insurgency during the Malayan Emergency of 1948-1960.<sup>141</sup> Diem had visited Malaya in 1960 to view the results of the UK's successful suppression of rural guerillas, and during that visit, he met Sir Robert Thompson.<sup>142</sup> A graduate of the right British schools, Thompson "liked horses, played tennis and golf, and enjoyed the odd glass of whiskey."<sup>143</sup> While serving in Malaya, he established a new, nationwide system for betting on horse races.<sup>144</sup> His sociable nature would pay dividends later on when he tried to establish a rapport with the Americans in Saigon.

Besides personal charisma, Thompson possessed experience borne from a professional life spent in government and military service in Southeast Asia. After graduating from Cambridge, he joined the Malayan Civil Service, arriving in country in 1938, on the eve of World War II. When the war started, he entered the Royal Air Force (RAF) in Singapore before returning to the civil service, which sent him to China to learn

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<sup>139</sup> Busch, *All the Way with JFK?*, 63.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>141</sup> Thompson, *Make for the Hills*, 87-115.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>143</sup> Busch, *All the Way with JFK?*, 96. Thompson graduated from Marlborough public school (an elite British high school) and Cambridge University.

<sup>144</sup> Thompson, *Make for the Hills*, 120.

Cantonese.<sup>145</sup> When the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1941, Thompson was skeet shooting on a racecourse in Macao.<sup>146</sup>

Involved in the defense of Hong Kong, he escaped as the city fell to Japanese forces.<sup>147</sup> As he moved through the Chinese countryside, Thompson used his personal business cards (partly written in Chinese) to elicit help from Chinese soldiers and guerillas. He noticed that, while his identification as a Malayan civil servant and RAF officer provoked little response, the locals were impressed that he was a Cambridge graduate.<sup>148</sup> This fact would later impress the Americans, too.<sup>149</sup>

Thompson eventually linked up with the British military, and he was quick to return to the fight. Assigned to work with Brigadier General Ode Wingate, Thompson became a member of the Chindits, a formation of British and Commonwealth soldiers trained to operate behind enemy lines in Japanese-occupied Burma.<sup>150</sup> Describing their job, he wrote they were “to ambush, to sabotage, and to disappear back into the jungle.”<sup>151</sup> In short, the Chindits were guerillas. Within this mission, Thompson’s duties as an RAF officer were to coordinate for their air support and resupply.<sup>152</sup>

It was during his time with the Chindits that Thompson had his first experience with guerilla warfare, albeit from the perspective of the insurgent, not the counter-guerilla. As befitted his position as the officer in charge of air resupply, Thompson

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<sup>145</sup> Thompson, *Make for the Hills*, 1-2.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>149</sup> Busch, *All the Way with JFK?*, 96.

<sup>150</sup> Thompson, *Make for the Hills*, 19.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

focused on coordinating for the logistical support necessary to sustain operations. While he learned—through personal experience—“that the body can go for a long time on a very meager ration,”<sup>153</sup> he also found he had to rely on friendly Burmese villagers to help collect supply drops or take care of wounded soldiers, underlining the importance of civilian support for insurgencies.<sup>154</sup> His service with General Wingate and guerrilla operations in Burma made an impact on Thompson, and he believed that Wingate “had a profound influence on me for the rest of my life.”<sup>155</sup> Indeed, Thompson’s time in Burma gave him first-hand experience as a guerilla, an experience that would help him contribute to the successful counterinsurgency operation against the communists in Malaya.

Thompson returned to Malaya in 1946, after war’s end and a brief sojourn in England.<sup>156</sup> The insurgency started shortly thereafter, and, from his position in the Malayan Civil Service, Thompson was drawn into operations to defeat it. Despite his primarily civilian post-war identity, he was re-commissioned and at the fighting’s start, he led a small infantry unit on patrols.<sup>157</sup> Thompson was quickly pulled, however, into the leadership that consolidated around Lieutenant-General Sir Harold Briggs, who assumed control of the British effort in the early 1950s.<sup>158</sup>

The communist insurgency in Malaya differed significantly from the one that would emerge against President Diem. In the Malayan Emergency the majority of the

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<sup>153</sup> Thompson, *Make for the Hills*, 26.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, 24, 28.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, 77-78.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, 88-89.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

communists came from the Chinese minority; they were visibly different from their Malayan neighbors.<sup>159</sup> Geographically, the two countries were also dissimilar: while Malaya was a peninsula, which limited the insurgents' ability to resupply or maneuver, South Vietnam's western border with Laos and Cambodia was covered in jungle and used by the communists to reinforce and logistically support their operations.<sup>160</sup> This route was called the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and Thompson noted that "it is only necessary to look at the map to see that this trail was vital for North Vietnamese infiltration and that, without it, the war could not have been waged."<sup>161</sup>

These differences would become apparent to Thompson when he traveled to Saigon in 1961 to lead BRIAM. Until then, he was part of British efforts to defeat the Chinese communist insurgents in Malaya. From his position on staff, Thompson was involved in what became known as the Briggs Plan, which had three parts. First, military, police, and civil government efforts were synchronized under a single leadership structure. Thompson wrote that this structure achieved "not co-ordination by co-ordinated action."<sup>162</sup> Next—and this would have direct bearing on the future South Vietnamese Strategic Hamlet Program—the estimated half million Chinese who were squatting on government land and supporting the insurgents were resettled into new villages. Police and local Home Guard units defended the new villages, and Thompson believed this resettlement deprived the guerrillas of recruits and supplies.<sup>163</sup> Finally, the

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<sup>159</sup> Thompson, *Make for the Hills*, 87.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>163</sup> Thompson, *Make for the Hills*, 93. Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency*, 142.

British in Malaya enforced strict laws that, according to Thompson, allowed the government to hang terrorists, which included “anyone carrying arms, ammunition or explosives without a licence.”<sup>164</sup> Expanded detention rules resulted in thousands of additional detainees, and new measures to control food supplies included ordinances that cans of food were to be punctured when sold, which necessitated rapid usage in a climate where food quickly spoiled.<sup>165</sup> Additionally, the colonial authorities were authorized to deport Chinese to China, and on at least two occasions, British forces surrounded guerilla strongholds and arrested and deported every Chinese civilian in the area.<sup>166</sup>

The Malayan police force expanded during the emergency, and it took the lead fighting the communists, with the armed forces operating in support.<sup>167</sup> And unlike the Americans in South Vietnam, the British were not functioning in an advisory capacity. With the appointment of Field Marshal Sir Gerald Templar as both civilian high commissioner and military director of operations (replacing General Briggs), total control of the counterinsurgency effort was centered on one British officer.<sup>168</sup> Therefore, in addition to the geographic and ethnic differences between the insurgencies in Malaya and South Vietnam, the British were able to pursue a strategy against the communist guerillas that derived from their total control of Malaya, allowing them to dictate events in ways the Americans in Saigon could not.

The Americans’ limited role colored the relationship between the Diem government, the American mission, and BRIAM. The South Vietnamese president

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<sup>164</sup> Thompson, *Make for the Hills*, 93.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>167</sup> Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency*, 103.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, 16, 18.



would exploit the fissures amongst the Americans and between BRIAM and the US country team in order to promote his own agenda. And in the early 1960s, competing British and American counterinsurgency strategies proved to be Diem's point of manipulation.

Concerned with finding a better way to defeat the Viet Cong, MAAG and State Department personnel developed a counterinsurgency plan (CIP) for South Vietnam in early 1961.<sup>169</sup> Before its publication, the ARVN's efforts to defeat the communist insurgency focused on securing key population centers and roads. Many South Vietnamese military units were tied down in defensive positions, reacting to communist actions. These units would conduct periodic sweeps that had little lasting effect.<sup>170</sup> To remedy the situation, the CIP recommended several changes: ARVN should be expanded, the Civil Guard should be transferred to the Vietnamese Department of Defense, and ARVN's command and control system should be simplified.

MAAG officers were especially critical of Diem's techniques for directing military operations.<sup>171</sup> ARVN officers typically reported to the chief of the province in which they were stationed. As the province chiefs answered directly to Diem, the South Vietnamese president was effectively able to bypass the military's chain of command.<sup>172</sup> However, Diem's habits were not the product of impatience. Rather, commented the

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<sup>169</sup> *FRUS*, 1961-1963, Vietnam, Volume I, 1961, eds. Ronald D. Landa and Charles S. Sampson (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1988), Document 1. Accessed November 14<sup>th</sup>, 2016. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v01/d1>.

<sup>170</sup> The United States Department of Defense, *United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967*, Part IV.B.1., (Washington, D.C.: 1971), 10.

<sup>171</sup> *FRUS*, 1961-1963, Vietnam, Volume I, 1961, Document 1.

<sup>172</sup> *United States-Vietnam Relations*, Part IV.B.1., 9-10.

CIP's authors, Diem's style seemed "to have been designed to divide responsibility in order to guard against the possibility of a military coup through placing too much power in the hands of a single subordinate."<sup>173</sup>

The CIP was also concerned that the Civil Guard—a paramilitary police force tasked with internal security—had been overwhelmed by the scope of the communist insurgency, necessitating ARVN assistance, which undermined the army's ability to guard against an external threat.<sup>174</sup> Consequently, the plan recommended moving the Civil Guard to the control of the South Vietnamese Department of Defense, which would allow the guard to receive military training and military-style weapons from MAAG. At the same time, the CIP recommended that ARVN temporarily assume some of the Civil Guard's security duties to enable the Civil Guard to retrain for military-type counterinsurgency operations, although ARVN would remain as the primary counter-guerilla organization.<sup>175</sup>

Besides reorganizing the structure of the security forces, the CIP also suggested that the Diem regime increase coordinated propaganda and civil development to support military operations against the insurgency. These military operations would take the form "net and spear" tactics, and consisted of small units (the "net") moving from pacified areas into the jungle to hunt communist guerillas.<sup>176</sup> Once found, the net would call for the "spear"—the mobile reserve—to destroy the Viet Cong unit. The American military advisors reasoned that, once the communists in a certain area had been

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<sup>173</sup> *FRUS*, 1961-1963, Vietnam, Volume I, 1961, Document 1.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>176</sup> *United States-Vietnam Relations*, Part IV.B.1., 10.

destroyed, ARVN units would push out into new areas, expanding the reach of the government.<sup>177</sup>

Writing in 1967, the authors of the Pentagon Papers reasoned that it was “not clear how well refined either concept [Diem’s original static defense tactics or the new American “net and spear” methods] was, or (with hindsight) whether the American plan was really a great deal more realistic than Diem’s.”<sup>178</sup> The Pentagon Papers stressed that the CIP’s primary purpose seemed to be to encourage the Diem regime to develop a systematic plan for clearing Viet Cong controlled areas, “instead of tying up most of his forces defending fixed installations, with periodic uneventful sweeps through the hinterland.”<sup>179</sup>

It is significant that in its initial form, the CIP was primarily concerned with military operations. The final version—after input from the US Embassy and the State Department—introduced more civil reforms, which included encouraging the South Vietnamese president to bring his political opponents into the government.<sup>180</sup> The CIP also proposed an increase in US funding to allow for the additional recruitment of 20,000 ARVN soldiers.<sup>181</sup> However, in early 1961, during negotiations with Diem for the CIP’s

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<sup>177</sup> *United States-Vietnam Relations*, Part IV.B.1., 10.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.* “The Pentagon Papers” refers to *United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967*. This report was compiled from 1967-1969 at the behest of then Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara. His intent was to develop a comprehensive study of America’s gradually increasing involvement in Vietnam from 1940 until 1967.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>180</sup> *United States-Vietnam Relations*, Part IV.B.1., 10-11.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

implementation, the Americans emphasized that any additional money would be dependent on his acceptance of the State Department's recommended civil reforms.<sup>182</sup>

These reforms, of course, would have undermined Diem's control of South Vietnam, something he was quite reluctant to do without reassurances of continued American support for his government.<sup>183</sup> Additionally, any hint that financial support would be withheld seemed counter-productive to some American observers. A weakened Diem regime might encourage a coup, and Lansdale, for one, argued that the alternatives to Diem could be much worse, creating a power vacuum the communists might exploit.<sup>184</sup> President Kennedy was also familiar with past outcomes of efforts to influence foreign governments by withholding aid, having been a congressman when Truman pressured Chiang Kai-shek and Nationalist China with similar tactics. Without American money, the Chinese communists defeated Chiang, and the loss of a pro-West government in China had had significant negative political ramifications for the Democratic Party.<sup>185</sup>

As the Americans debated whether threats to withhold aid would effectively force Diem to make changes to his government, the United Kingdom prepared to send Thompson and his fellow Britons to Saigon. In part through American and British diplomatic encouragement, and perhaps in part from his own designs, Diem had invited the UK to send an advising team in August 1961.<sup>186</sup> In that same month, the British Foreign Secretary informed his American and French counterparts that the United

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<sup>182</sup> *United States-Vietnam Relations*, Part IV.B.1., 11.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, 11-12.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*, 11-12, 17.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>186</sup> Busch, *All the Way with JFK?*, 88-93.

Kingdom thought the situation in South Vietnam had gotten worse. Consequently, the Foreign Secretary said, Her Majesty's Government had finalized the necessary coordination for Thompson to go to Saigon "with rather a small mission. There is nothing that Thompson doesn't know about counter-insurgency methods, and he should be able to be of help."<sup>187</sup>

Despite British assurances as to the competency of Thompson and his team, and despite the fact that BRIAM was in Saigon at Diem's invitation, some Americans, particularly in MAAG, were hesitant to welcome the newcomers. While the State Department had worked to encourage American allies to support the anti-communist effort in South Vietnam, the general in charge of MAAG sent a telegram in June, 1961 to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff expressing his concerns about the impending arrival of the British training mission.<sup>188</sup> The general wrote that, while he understood that American diplomats were exerting pressure on the US military to involve British advisors in MAAG's anti-guerilla training programs, he thought these outside influences would confuse the South Vietnamese. MAAG had a way of doing things, the general stated, and these allies might provide advice that would run counter to what the Americans were attempting to teach. The general reserved special criticism for the incoming BRIAM team: "I am unable here to pin down 'Thompson group' qualifications and, more important, its authority; only that they are anti-guerrilla 'experts.' Feel we must insist

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<sup>187</sup> *FRUS*, 1961-1963, Vietnam, Volume I, 1961, eds. Ronald D. Landa and Charles S. Sampson (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1988), Document 115. Accessed November 29<sup>th</sup>, 2016. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v01/d115>.

<sup>188</sup> Busch, *All the Way with JFK?*, 67.

they convince us by furnishing concrete anti-guerrilla material for our evaluation and consideration before we approve their coming.”<sup>189</sup>

Writing from his desk in Washington, Lansdale also voiced his reservations about British advisors in South Vietnam. His concerns were threefold. First, he disliked the idea of foreigners deciding how the Vietnamese would spend American aid, which “would be what would happen in reality if a persuasive British ‘expert’ were placed to advise President Diem and his appointed assistants on these [counter-insurgency] operations.”<sup>190</sup> Second, the conflict in South Vietnam was not like the one in Malaya, and therefore any British advice was of little use. And finally, Lansdale believed that before looking to the UK for help, the Americans should draw from their own counter-guerrilla experiences. He specifically mentioned the recent American-Filipino anti-communist campaign in the Philippines, in which he played a key role, noting that that effort “stands up well against the British accomplishments in Malaya.”<sup>191</sup> Lansdale summarized his position with the admonishment “All we have to do is remember the lessons we learned in the very recent past, and to make use of them wisely and energetically.”<sup>192</sup>

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<sup>189</sup> *FRUS*, 1961-1963, Vietnam, Volume I, 1961, eds. Ronald D. Landa and Charles S. Sampson (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1988), Document 66. Accessed November 28<sup>th</sup>, 2016. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v01/d66>.

<sup>190</sup> *FRUS*, 1958-1960, Vietnam, Volume I, eds. Edward C. Keefer and David W. Mabon (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1986), Document 136. Accessed November 29<sup>th</sup>, 2016. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1958-60v01/d136>.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>192</sup> *FRUS*, 1958-1960, Vietnam, Volume I, Document 136.

Ultimately, the State Department's desire for British participation prevailed over the hesitations of the military advisors, but negotiations between British and American diplomats in Saigon established only vague boundaries as to what realms BRIAM would confine itself. Eventually, the ambassadors reached a general consensus that the British would leave MAAG to continue its military advising, and BRIAM would instead concern itself with providing guidance to the South Vietnamese regarding civic actions and intelligence operations.<sup>193</sup> This informal understanding was designed to provide flexibility for American and British advisors on the ground to work through any friction points as they occurred.<sup>194</sup>

Despite the British ambassador's informal agreement to limit BRIAM's activities to advising civil and intelligence operations, upon his arrival in South Vietnam in September 1961, Thompson—while possessing little previous experience with the country—did not hesitate in commenting on American military advising. During his first tour as the head of BRIAM, he quickly identified what he saw as the shortcomings of the United States' effort, writing that as of 1961, “No one had looked at the French record and no American we met had read Mao.”<sup>195</sup>

In Thompson's opinion, one of the failings of the American effort was its inability to see counterinsurgency as anything but a military campaign.<sup>196</sup> He saw the American attempt to support Diem while simultaneously fighting the Viet Cong as disorganized. A 1962 visit to Washington, D.C.—with stops at the Pentagon, State Department, and

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<sup>193</sup> Busch, *All the Way with JFK?*, 87.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid.

<sup>195</sup> Thompson, *Make for the Hills*, 127. Mao Zedong was considered the master of Asian guerilla warfare.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid., 127.

CIA—left him with the impression “of a vast machine completely unco-ordinated, rather like a large four-engined aircraft with its engines unsynchronized.”<sup>197</sup> From his travels around the South Vietnamese countryside, Thompson deduced that the “Americans (and the very great majority involved in Vietnam were only there for short spells) never understood that to win the war they had to build a country. It could not be won by military means alone.”<sup>198</sup>

Drawing from his experience in Malaya, Thompson believed that to be successful in defeating the Viet Cong, the South Vietnamese government needed an overarching strategy that encompassed more than military operations:

It must include all political, social, economic, administrative, police and other measures which have a bearing on the insurgency. Above all it must clearly define roles and responsibilities to avoid duplication of effort and to ensure that there are no gaps in the government’s field of action.<sup>199</sup>

Despite the ostensible limitations on BRIAM’s ability to advise the South Vietnamese on military operations, Thompson wished to rectify what he saw as one of the main differences between British operations in Malaya and American advice to Diem. “In Malaya, the army supported the civil power during an ‘emergency’ but in Vietnam, the civil power, where it existed, supported the army in a war.”<sup>200</sup>

The American CIP certainly fit Thompson’s critique. While civic actions and political reforms were part of the plan, they were either added later, through State Department suggestions or were included so as to maximize the effectiveness of net and spear tactics. Indeed, the Americans encouraged civil reform to improve the

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<sup>197</sup> Thompson, *Make for the Hills*, 134.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

<sup>199</sup> Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency*, 55.

<sup>200</sup> Thompson, *Make for the Hills*, 128.



effectiveness of military operations. Thompson, however, saw the situation differently, and, putting his ideas into writing, he produced the Delta Plan in the fall of 1961.<sup>201</sup>

Thompson reasoned that, despite the largesse of the United States, the Americans and South Vietnamese lacked the resources to implement local civil reform and defeat the communist insurgency in every province at the same time, but which the South Vietnamese were nevertheless attempting to do in early 1961.<sup>202</sup> Instead, he argued that—within a larger countrywide campaign plan—resources should be concentrated in one region to secure and develop it before moving on to the next. Thompson determined that the Mekong Delta, home to South Vietnam’s best rice fields, had a weak Viet Cong presence and would, therefore, be an easy place to start.<sup>203</sup> He noted, “The Americans, of course, preferred to tackle the toughest areas first and were impatient for action and results.”<sup>204</sup> Rather than marshal resources to secure the delta, the United States wanted ARVN to focus on Zone D, a communist stronghold to the north of Saigon.<sup>205</sup> Thompson believed, however, that starting a new counterinsurgency plan in a heavily contested area would doom it to failure; the enemy would be able to destroy friendly outposts while they were in the process of being established.

Thompson’s Delta Plan did have some similarities to the CIP. Like the Americans, Thompson called for the establishment of a consolidated chain of command. He noted that in the Mekong Delta, each province conducted its own small war effort;

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<sup>201</sup> The United States Department of Defense, *United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967*, Part V.B.4. “The Kennedy Administration” Book I, (Washington, D.C.: 1971), 345.

<sup>202</sup> Thompson, *Make for the Hills*, 129.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*

there was little to no coordination between province chiefs, who controlled the military forces within their respective areas. This poor coordination was exploited by the Viet Cong guerillas, who were able to shift efforts across the region depending on the different government activity in each province.<sup>206</sup>

Thompson therefore proposed the creation of a unified regional command, in charge of the entire counterinsurgency campaign in the Mekong Delta. This command, consisting of an ARVN corps headquarters, would coordinate not just military operations but the government's intelligence, propaganda, and civic action programs as well, providing an overarching strategy to replace the uncoordinated, piecemeal actions of the South Vietnamese (as they appeared to the British and Americans).<sup>207</sup> Perhaps most importantly, it would report directly to the Diem-controlled National Security Council in Saigon, bypassing the leading ARVN generals.<sup>208</sup>

Thompson's proposed regional command highlights a key difference between the reforms recommended by the Americans and those suggested by BRIAM. In the CIP, ARVN units would respond to a centralized chain of command that imitated the Americans'. Operational plans would be developed by military staff and would flow from the generals in Saigon through subordinate commands to units in the field. The province chiefs were removed from the process.<sup>209</sup> Thompson's Delta Plan, on the other hand, left the province chiefs within the military decision-making system and placed the

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<sup>206</sup> *United States-Vietnam Relations*, Part V.B.4. Book I, 347.

<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>208</sup> The United States Department of Defense, *United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967*, Part IV.B.2., (Washington, D.C.: 1971), 11-12.

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*, 12-13.

regional effort directly under Diem's control, maintaining the president's grip on the ARVN.<sup>210</sup>

There were conceptual differences between the CIP and Delta Plan as well. The American plan was intended to accomplish the stated mission of "Defeat Communist insurgency efforts in [South Vietnam]."<sup>211</sup> In contrast, Thompson argued, "The overall aim of any counter insurgency plan must be to win the people. The killing of communist terrorists will follow automatically from that."<sup>212</sup> While the United States considered South Vietnam primarily a military problem to be solved with civic operations in support, BRIAM looked at it as an issue of nation building that required the central government to secure its population.

To that end, Thompson's plan recommended the establishment of strategic hamlets, consisting of 200 to 300 hundred houses clustered together behind formidable defenses. He suggested relocating some families to facilitate the establishment of this perimeter.<sup>213</sup> Local self-defense groups would protect these hamlets, as "all peasants have a natural instinct for small-scale guerilla and anti-guerilla operations."<sup>214</sup> But he argued that in the event of an emergency, they would be supported by the Civil Guard, a paramilitary police force designed—in Thompson's opinion—to be the primary internal security force in each province. ARVN's role within the Delta Plan would be to clear areas of large guerilla units so that strategic hamlets could be established. Once the

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<sup>210</sup> *United States-Vietnam Relations*, Part IV.B.2., 11-12.

<sup>211</sup> *FRUS*, 1961-1963, Vietnam, Volume I, 1961, Document 1.

<sup>212</sup> *United States-Vietnam Relations*, Part V.B.4. Book I, 347.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*, 349.

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.*, 351.

hamlet's defenses were constructed, the military would move on to the next contested area, leaving the Civil Guard to take the lead in counterinsurgency operations.<sup>215</sup>

According to the Delta Plan, after establishing a strategic hamlet, the Diem regime should then prioritize building schools and medical facilities, and the communication infrastructure should be improved to spread pro-government propaganda.<sup>216</sup> However, even within the delta region, the South Vietnamese government did not have enough military, police, and logistical resources to build strategic hamlets everywhere at once. Therefore, Thompson argued that, just like at the national level, it was crucial that strategic hamlets be constructed systematically, securing one zone before moving to the next.<sup>217</sup>

While he was presented with two different plans to secure South Vietnam, President Diem had his own strategy for defeating the communist insurgency. Indeed, as the negotiations for the CIP's implementation dragged out over the course of 1961, Diem looked to exploit the internal divisions within the United States mission in Saigon. These divisions had existed long before the CIP but now found new outlets. While many State Department officials believed that financial pressure should be leveraged to force the South Vietnamese regime to accept democratic reforms, many military advisors argued that such pressure would be self-defeating. They maintained that, without funding, Diem would fall, which would create a power vacuum the communists could use to their gain. Wanting to maintain the flow of American money without implementing American changes to his rule, Diem would use Thompson's Delta Plan to gain American support

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<sup>215</sup> *United States-Vietnam Relations*, Part V.B.4. Book I, 351.

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*, 355.

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*, 357.

for a South Vietnamese-developed effort to defeat the insurgency and strengthen the Ngo family's hold on the country.

Meanwhile, in an effort to determine a way forward from the stalled CIP negotiations, President Kennedy prepared to send General Maxwell Taylor to Saigon in late 1961 to develop yet another American advising plan. Thompson had met Taylor earlier that year, during a visit to Washington.<sup>218</sup> Now Thompson would use Taylor's visit as an opportunity to convince the Americans to support his vision of a civil solution to the fighting in South Vietnam.

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<sup>218</sup> Thompson, *Make for the Hills*, 124.

CHAPTER IV – A VIETNAMESE SOLUTION TO A VIETNAMESE PROBLEM,  
1961-1963: THE STRATEGIC HAMLET PROGRAM

As 1960 began, the Americans were concerned that Diem's campaign against the communists in South Vietnam had become a meandering collection of directionless wanderings. To military and political observers from the United States, it appeared that ARVN forces were tied down in defensive positions, reacting to Viet Cong attacks with ineffective sweeping operations that achieved little beyond forcing the Viet Cong to blend back into the jungles. Despite the military and financial aid the United States was devoting to South Vietnam's defense and economic development, the Americans thought little was being accomplished.

The perceived absence, to the Americans, at least, of a coherent South Vietnamese counterinsurgency plan was one of the principal reasons they blamed for the lack of results.<sup>219</sup> With the idea that the production of any plan would at least create a starting point from which to operate, the United States mission to South Vietnam wrote the counterinsurgency plan (CIP) in 1960 and 1961. Besides an offensive mindset, this plan called for the simplification of the ARVN chain of command. Diem had divided control of military forces in the provinces between two structures: the military hierarchy and the provincial chiefs, who had control of the Civil Guard, elements of the Self-Defense Corps (a local militia organization), and any ARVN forces assigned to static positions. The control the ARVN chain of command did have was typically limited to forces assigned to operations with defined time limits. Consequently, under the existing situation, Diem was able to exert significant control over the armed forces of the

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<sup>219</sup> *United States-Vietnam Relations*, Part IV.B.2., 7.

Republic of Vietnam as the provincial chiefs were appointed by, and answered to, him. This situation helped Diem maintain his grip on power, but in the Americans' opinion, it also hindered effective ARVN military operations. The CIP, if implemented, would remove the provincial chiefs from command of ARVN forces. This change was unpalatable to the Diem regime, and it was hesitant to accede to any plan that called for it.

However, in the latter half of 1961, Thompson's Delta Plan proved an attractive alternative to the South Vietnamese. It allowed Diem to maintain a significant amount of control over the ARVN, and by accepting it, he showed, too, that he was responsive to foreign advice. Diem's enthusiasm for Thompson's plan frustrated MAAG, whose chief commented that the Briton's actions equated to "the case of a doctor called in for consultation on a clinical case, actually performing an amputation without consulting the resident physician—and without being required to assume the overall responsibility for the patient."<sup>220</sup>

Certainly, Thompson's development of the Delta Plan was derived from contemporary British concerns with the American advisory effort in South Vietnam. In short, the British did not have confidence in the United States' ability to guide the Diem regime towards victory against the communists, and Her Majesty's Government believed a communist takeover of South Vietnam would threaten British interests and possessions in the rest of East Asia, further diminishing British global power in the post-World War II environment. Thompson's Delta Plan reflected both the British experience in the Malayan Emergency and his personal belief that Vietnam's insurgency was primarily

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<sup>220</sup> *United States-Vietnam Relations*, Part IV.B.2., 12.

political in nature. This assertion put his plan squarely at odds with MAAG, which maintained that the Diem regime should pursue an essentially military solution to the communist threat. However, the solution purposed by MAAG had the potential to draw the United States deeper into what was, at that point, a war of secondary importance in American foreign policy. So when Thompson passed his plan to Maxwell Taylor, who was visiting Saigon on behalf of President Kennedy, his ideas found a ready audience within the American government.

At the same time, Diem presumably saw in Thompson's plan an opportunity to demonstrate to the Americans that he was willing to accept foreign advice, which had become a precondition for the continuation of American aid, although his preference for the British plan vis-à-vis the American one initially frustrated the United States mission in Saigon. Additionally, Thompson's Delta Plan, which called for the creation of strategic hamlets, was essentially the evolution of another, ongoing counterinsurgency plan that the Ngo brothers had been pursuing: the agrovilles. The agrovilles were an earlier South Vietnamese attempt to control and secure the South Vietnamese population, and in accepting the Delta Plan, and by implementing it on a larger scale, Diem seemed to hope that the Americans would continue funding his government, allowing for this Vietnamese counterinsurgency program to expand in scope and ambition. Besides working to secure the rural population from Viet Cong attacks, the Strategic Hamlet Program would serve, too, as a vehicle for the Diem regime to control its own population, propagating its ideology of Personalism as both an alternative to communism and a way to built support for the government in Saigon.



From 1960 through 1961, many of the decisions the Americans and South Vietnamese made in Saigon occurred within the context of the Laotian crisis, which was precipitated by repeated communist victories there against pro-western forces. During the ensuing peace negotiations, President Kennedy decided not to commit US military resources to support the pro-west Laotians but instead favored a coalition government—despite evidence that communist forces in Laos would retain significant power in the country.<sup>221</sup> Consequently, Kennedy, already influenced by the fall of Chiang Kai-shek after American support was withheld, decided a show of support for the South Vietnamese government was necessary to display to Southeast Asian leaders that the United States would remain committed to friendly governments in the region.<sup>222</sup>

Subsequently, as negotiations with Diem for the implementation of the CIP dragged on, the Kennedy government became more agreeable to the idea of supporting him even in the absence of political reforms. Therefore, within this context, the Kennedy administration sent several missions to South Vietnam to see what could be done to rapidly work with the GVN to arrest the growth of the communist insurgency.<sup>223</sup> General Maxwell Taylor, from his position as the president's military advisor, led the last visit in 1961.<sup>224</sup>

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<sup>221</sup> *United States-Vietnam Relations*, Part IV.B.1., 1-2.

<sup>222</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>223</sup> *United States-Vietnam Relations*, Part IV.B.1., “Chronology,” 1-22. Part IV.B.1. of the Pentagon Papers has a chronology section with pages 1-22. However, Chapter 1, which comes after the chronology, begins on a new page 1. Therefore, it has been noted with “Chronology” where applicable. Notes for Part IV.B.1. without “Chronology” refer to pages within the timeline section or the various chapters.

<sup>224</sup> *FRUS*, 1961-1963, Vietnam, Volume I, 1961, eds. Ronald D. Landa and Charles S. Sampson (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1988), Document 163.

The Taylor Mission, as it was called, arrived in Saigon on October 18<sup>th</sup>, 1961 and stayed through the 24<sup>th</sup> of that month.<sup>225</sup> Prior to its arrival, Diem, viewing the situation in Laos, had brought up the possibility of a joint US-South Vietnam defense treaty with the intent to secure a formal American commitment to the survival of the South Vietnamese government. Indeed, one of the authors of the Pentagon Papers commented, “For Diem, a clear-cut treaty probably seemed the best possible combination of maximizing the American commitment while minimizing American leverage. And that, of course, would help explain why the [Kennedy] Administration was not terribly attracted to such a proposal.”<sup>226</sup>

Regardless, after Diem broached the topic of a defense treaty, Taylor was dispatched to assist the president in gaining better insight into the situation and to assess the viability of committing American combat forces to the fight. The addition of US ground forces was something that Diem seemed to waiver on, debating whether they would further commit the Americans to his cause or whether they—by their presence would serve to undermine his nationalist credentials.<sup>227</sup> Meanwhile, after his arrival in country, Taylor sought to examine the different ways American capabilities could be leverage to assist the GVN as well as assess the actual stability of the Diem regime and its ability to defeat the insurgency with, or without, US support.<sup>228</sup>

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Accessed January 26<sup>th</sup>, 2017. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v01/d163>.

<sup>225</sup> *United States-Vietnam Relations*, Part IV.B.1., “Chronology,” 15.

<sup>226</sup> *United States-Vietnam Relations*, Part IV.B.1., 70.

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.*, 69-70.

<sup>228</sup> *FRUS*, 1961-1963, Vietnam, Volume I, 1961, eds. Ronald D. Landa and Charles S. Sampson (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1988), Document 173.

The Taylor mission also acted as a psychological counter to the setbacks the global anti-communist effort had suffered in Laos. Lansdale, for one, reported that Nhu believed the “the Asian man-in-the-street” was profoundly demoralized by the compromise government installed in Vientiane. Nhu, Lansdale noted, saw the general’s visit as a public display of American commitment to the South Vietnamese government, a display that would improve the morale of the Vietnamese people.<sup>229</sup>

Taylor toured the country and met with key American and South Vietnamese officials, and in a subsequent eyes-only memorandum to President Kennedy, commented on the disunity of the American effort in Saigon. “Is there a need for better organization at the Washington end?” he wrote. “At the present time State, Defense and CIA are forwarding three separate reports to the White House. There is no agency short of the President with the responsibility and authority to scrutinize the interdepartmental actions taken and to direct corrective action when such is necessary.”<sup>230</sup>

Taylor also spoke with Thompson, and in the course of their interaction, Thompson gave him a draft of what became his Delta Plan.<sup>231</sup> Taylor brought the plan back to Washington, where Roger Hilsman, the head of the State Department’s Bureau of

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Accessed January 26<sup>th</sup>, 2017. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v01/d173>.

<sup>229</sup> *FRUS*, 1961-1963, Vietnam, Volume I, 1961, eds. Ronald D. Landa and Charles S. Sampson (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1988), Document 184. Accessed January 26<sup>th</sup>, 2017. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v01/d184>.

<sup>230</sup> *FRUS*, 1961-1963, Vietnam, Volume I, 1961, eds. Ronald D. Landa and Charles S. Sampson (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1988), Document 314. Accessed January 26<sup>th</sup>, 2017. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v01/d314>.

<sup>231</sup> *United States-Vietnam Relations*, Part IV.B.2., 11.

Intelligence and Research, saw it.<sup>232</sup> Hilsman was so taken by Thompson's plan that he copied many of its concepts into his "A Strategic Concept for South Vietnam," which was presented to an amenable Kennedy, who supported it.<sup>233</sup>

The American president, who was already reluctant to pressure Diem for reforms, feared that withholding military and financial aid to the South Vietnamese government would have a twofold, negative effect: first, the GVN might fall, much like the Kuomintang government in China had during the Truman administration. Second, within the context of the Laotian crisis, a failure to fund the Diem regime might give the appearance to the Soviet Union and Southeast Asia that the United States was not prepared to defend the region against communist expansion.<sup>234</sup> Therefore, as compared to conditional support discussed in the CIP, the Delta Plan—as presented in Hilsman's strategic concept paper—proved an opportunity to both encourage the Diem government to assume the offensive and show the world that the United States was to hold the line against communist expansion.

The Delta Plan and Hilsman's concept paper also served to address American concerns that were articulated by one of the State Department officials traveling with Taylor in Vietnam. These concerns reflected hesitations in signing a defense treaty with the Diem regime or sending US combat forces to fight the Viet Cong. In his report to President Kennedy, Taylor had called for the introduction of American ground forces, ostensibly to assist the South Vietnamese in recovery operations following recent

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<sup>232</sup> *United States-Vietnam Relations*, Part IV.B.2., 14.

<sup>233</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>234</sup> *United States-Vietnam Relations*, Part IV.B.1., 50-51.

flooding in the Mekong Delta.<sup>235</sup> These forces, however, would have had the ability to fight the Viet Cong in self-defense, a situation that would have provided both wide latitude for engaging in combat operations and the potential to draw the Americans deeper into the war.

In opposition to Taylor's recommendation, the State Department official thought the arrival of US combat forces would be counter-productive. "The Communist operation starts from the lowest social level the villages. The battle must be joined and won at this point. . . .Foreign military forces cannot themselves win the battle at the village level," wrote the official.<sup>236</sup> Only GVN forces could defeat the insurgency in the war for the hearts and minds of the South Vietnamese people, the official reasoned. Therefore, while the US should assist the GVN in this fight, the Americans must avoid "any treaty or pact which either shifts ultimate responsibility to the US or engages any full US commitment to eliminate the Viet Cong threat."<sup>237</sup> The official concluded:

US responsibility without control would be disastrous. Although control over SVN [South Vietnam] forces, as in Korea, might theoretically be possible, the Communist attack on VN [Vietnam] is radically different from the attack on Korea. If this were a situation in which the chances were good that application of US military force could solve the problem, then responsibility and control might be desirable. But it is not, so US control should not be sought.<sup>238</sup>

American internal debates over assuming a more direct role in combating the communist insurgency, or in formalizing the United States' relationship with the GVN in

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<sup>235</sup> *FRUS*, 1961-1963, Vietnam, Volume I, 1961, eds. Ronald D. Landa and Charles S. Sampson (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1988), Document 210. Accessed January 26<sup>th</sup>, 2017. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v01/d210>.

<sup>236</sup> *FRUS*, 1961-1963, Vietnam, Volume I, 1961, Document 210.

<sup>237</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>238</sup> *Ibid.*

a treaty, reflected the continuing conflict within the Kennedy administration over the best way forward in Southeast Asia. While no treaty was signed in 1961 or soldiers sent, Diem was able to capitalize on American reticence for direct combat operations by publically supporting Thompson's Delta Plan. As Hilsman's concept paper was, in many ways, a copy of Thompson's plan, the Briton's ideas about the way forward against the insurgency proved a compromise of sorts between the South Vietnamese government and its American backers that both sides could—at least initially—support.

Americans' indirect acceptance of the Delta Plan also displayed Diem and Nhu's ability to shape the destiny of their nation while managing the continued financial and military support their regime required to survive. The Ngo brothers had been concerned that the CIP would open the door to an ARVN coup, and they spent the majority of 1961 engaged in negotiations with the United States' mission in Saigon as to whether continued aid should be tied to South Vietnamese acceptance of the CIP, with its attached demands for political and military reforms.

Thompson's proposal proved the perfect expedient for the Ngos to escape American demands for a restructuring of the ARVN chain of command and their calls for the inclusion of political opponents into the GVN. Similarly, Thompson's interactions with Taylor showed that Thompson clearly knew how to work the American decision-making system. By gaining American presidential support for his plan—which was also Diem's preferred plan—Thompson presumably gained more influence with the GVN, placing him in a better position to guide the course of the war, achieving the UK's purpose in sending him to Saigon.

Thompson's maneuver around the Americans in Saigon to influence their superiors in Washington met with initial frustration from the United States mission in the South Vietnamese capital. The American ambassador fired off an angry telegram in November 1961 to his superiors, complaining that the "Thompson Mission is badly off rails from standpoint US-UK coordination and that Thompson recommendations to GVN, whatever may be their intrinsic merit, are bound to complicate our task of bringing about essential reforms in GVN military and administrative structure."<sup>239</sup> Elsewhere in the telegram, the ambassador noted with frustration that Thompson had submitted the Delta Plan to Diem "without prior consultation with US and without real effort to ascertain thrust of our plans or programs for counterinsurgency."<sup>240</sup>

But only a few months later, tensions between BRIAM and the American mission in Saigon appeared to have cooled. In February 1962, one official from the United States Embassy reported, "Thompson has been in constant touch with us on this [rural pacification efforts] and has meticulously coordinated his efforts with MAAG and the Embassy. His recommendations closely parallel those we have been or would be making to the GVN, and if accepted, they would be a major step forward for all concerned."<sup>241</sup> This rapprochement—perhaps driven by Thompson's own diplomatic skill and charm,

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<sup>239</sup> *FRUS*, 1961-1963, Vietnam, Volume I, 1961, eds. Ronald D. Landa and Charles S. Sampson (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1988), Document 299. Accessed January 26<sup>th</sup>, 2017. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v01/d299>.

<sup>240</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>241</sup> *FRUS*, 1961-1963, Vietnam, Volume II, 1962, eds. David M. Baehler, John P. Glennon, and Charles S. Sampson (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1990), Document 57. Accessed January 26<sup>th</sup>, 2017. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v02/d57>.

deriving in part from his time in England's elite schools—seems to have lasted throughout the remainder of the Strategic Hamlet Program.

Ultimately, Diem's maneuverings forced the Americans to support him while requiring little to no reform from the GVN, demonstrating Diem's understanding of the American political situation as well as the United States' conception of South Vietnam as a frontline within the global Cold War. Events proved that Diem did not hesitate to use BRIAM to influence the Americans. Diem's pursuit of the implementation of a South Vietnamese-inspired counterinsurgency plan demonstrated, too, the existence of an independent government in Saigon that was attempting to find Vietnamese solutions to Vietnamese problems—which was General Abrams's goal during the Vietnamization period described as the “better war” by historian Lewis Sorely.

The Strategic Hamlet Program truly was a South Vietnamese program. The American ambassador reported that, during a meeting between Taylor and Diem, Diem alluded to a new strategic plan he intended to implement after Taylor repeatedly stressed the importance of an overarching strategy that encompassed military, social, economic, and political lines of effort.<sup>242</sup> While Thompson, drawing from his experiences in Malaya, introduced the subject of strategic hamlets in the Delta Plan, the program Diem and Nhu championed built on pre-existing South Vietnamese efforts to secure and control the rural population, particularly the agrovillage program.

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<sup>242</sup> *FRUS*, 1961-1963, Vietnam, Volume I, 1961, eds. Ronald D. Landa and Charles S. Sampson (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1988), Document 174. Accessed January 26<sup>th</sup>, 2017. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v01/d174>.



Indeed, within the recent memory of most South Vietnamese, the French had pursued a strategy of consolidating parts of the rural population into secured villages and hamlets during their failed campaign against the Viet Minh.<sup>243</sup> This program proved a model for the South Vietnamese government when it implemented the Rural Community Development Centers Program in 1959.<sup>244</sup> These rural centers were referred to as agrovilles.<sup>245</sup> The agrovilles established under this program typically consisted of 300-500 families that had been relocated into centralized areas for the purpose of security, population control, and the more efficient distribution of government services, such as schools and clinics. However, the agrovilles were generally considered unsuccessful: peasants were unhappy about their removal from ancestral homes, the distance they had to travel to reach their fields, and the often-ineffective administrators assigned to oversee government services.<sup>246</sup> Diem recognized the Viet Cong were exploiting this discontent, and in 1960, he adjusted the program to construct smaller agro-hamlets, consisting of approximately 100 families and placed closer to village farmland.<sup>247</sup> The Strategic Hamlet Program built these agro-hamlets across the country, but “it was inevitable, given this lineage, that [the program] be regarded by the peasants as old wine in newly-labeled bottles.”<sup>248</sup>

The program’s nation-wide scale and the level of planning and organization separated strategic hamlets from agrovilles and the sporadic construction of the agro-

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<sup>243</sup> *United States-Vietnam Relations*, Part IV.B.2., vi.

<sup>244</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>245</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>246</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>247</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>248</sup> *Ibid.*

hamlets. In short, the Strategic Hamlet Program, after securing the support of the Americans, “became the operational blueprint for ending the insurgency.”<sup>249</sup> While the earlier programs had supplemented ARVN operations, now ARVN operations were (in theory) used to shape the establishment of strategic hamlets.

According to plan, a strategic hamlet was constructed over several phases, each conducted with the intent of achieving a political solution to the communist insurgency. First, ARVN forces cleared a designated area. Next, local villagers built defenses for their respective hamlets, a process that might necessitate the relocation of families under the rationale that consolidation made it easier for the government to administer services and defend against Viet Cong attacks. Finally, the GVN established social services, often building schools and clinics, to improve the social welfare of the rural population and win their hearts and minds.<sup>250</sup> Simultaneously, ARVN forces turned hamlet defense over to the Civil Guard, a paramilitary unit that acted as a provincial response force, which then transferred security responsibilities to locally recruited villagers enrolled in the Self-Defense Corps.<sup>251</sup> At the national level, Diem established the Inter-Ministerial Committee for Strategic Hamlets (IMCSH), which coordinated the heads of various South Vietnamese ministries, ostensibly to guide the program’s direction. However, the IMCSH answered to Nhu.<sup>252</sup>

Nhu saw the program as an opportunity to spread the ideology he believed was the alternative to communism: Personalism. Explaining their purpose, Nhu stated:

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<sup>249</sup> *United States-Vietnam Relations*, Part IV.B.2., 4.

<sup>250</sup> *Ibid.*, i.

<sup>251</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>252</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

“Strategic hamlets seek to assure the security of the people in order that the success of the political, social, and military revolution might be assured by the enthusiastic movement of solidarity and self-sufficiency.”<sup>253</sup> The Strategic Hamlet Program offered the perfect conduit—by way of the provincial administration—through which the Diem regime could spread this message.<sup>254</sup>

Measuring the effectiveness of each phase soon proved difficult. One author of the Pentagon Papers noted that for the Vietnamese and their foreign advisors, success proved a matter of perspective as all sides had different ideas as to what the program should accomplish:

It is the problem of men with different perspectives each moulding [sic] his own conception of a proper body to the same skeleton. If the final product were to have some semblance of coherence and mutual satisfaction it was necessary that the shapers came to agreement on substance and operational procedure, not just that they agree on the proper skeleton upon which to work.<sup>255</sup>

While there was a general consensus that the program should happen, how it should happen proved a point of contention, reflecting the overall incoherence and disconnect present amongst the various foreign advisors and between the foreigners and the Diem regime.

At the program’s start, American military advisors were concerned that it subordinated military concerns to political ones, but they viewed the increased security role of the Civil Guard and Self-Defense Corps as an improvement that forced ARVN forces into a more aggressive role. Even then, MAAG was concerned that the program’s

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<sup>253</sup> *United States-Vietnam Relations*, Part IV.B.2., 21.

<sup>254</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>255</sup> *Ibid.*, ii.

intended deliberate pace, designed to methodically win the hearts and minds, would be too slow to be effective.<sup>256</sup>

Meanwhile, American civilian personnel in Saigon and Washington tended to favor the program's emphasis on winning the people's support as a political solution to the conflict; they considered any communist gains a reflection of Diem's lack of popular support. Many American civilians in Saigon also saw any increase in GVN administrative capabilities as another step towards the ability of the South Vietnamese to conduct operations independent of American support.<sup>257</sup>

However, Diem and Nhu once again used the differences amongst the various American attitudes to push their own agenda. An author of the Pentagon Papers noted that in regard to expectations, "US groups differed in degree; Diem's expectations differed in kind."<sup>258</sup> It is important to remember that the Pentagon Papers were a study compiled by Americans several years after the death of Diem but before the ultimate withdrawal of the United States from the war. From this midway perspective, with greater wisdom born of what had gone before, but without the knowledge of what was to come, the study's authors drew from secret American documents to determine that Diem's first priority, within the conditions set by the Laotian compromise, was controlling the population. Winning the hearts and minds would come after. In

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<sup>256</sup> *United States-Vietnam Relations*, Part IV.B.2., 18.

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

discussions with Ambassador Nolting, Diem “stressed that any attempt to “broaden the government” and to “make it more popular” was putting the cart before the horse.”<sup>259</sup>

The Strategic Hamlet Program presented an opportunity for Diem and Nhu to accomplish a difficult task: secure American support without sacrificing Vietnamese sovereignty. As the South Vietnamese government implemented the program, it satisfied American civilians calling for Diem to take a more active role in defeating the insurgency. At the same time, the program appeased American military advisors at MAAG, who wanted the ARVN freed from static defensive positions to conduct offensive operations against the Viet Cong.<sup>260</sup> While there was often dissension within the foreigners’ ranks in Saigon, and while there was substantial disagreement about the course the Strategic Hamlet Program should take, it looked as if the majority of Diem’s backers believed that the program was, to varying degrees, a possible solution to Vietnam’s communist problem. Therefore, Diem and Nhu had a certain amount of latitude to use the program for their own gains: namely, to strengthen their hold on South Vietnam’s rural population, in part by spreading their ideology of Personalism.

Thus in early 1962, on the eve of Operation Sunrise—the first operation under the new Strategic Hamlet Program—Diem and Nhu appeared to have found the perfect solution to their situation: a counterinsurgency program that was driven by the Vietnamese, approved by the Americans, promised a way to defeat the communists, and provided a means through which the Ngo brothers could expand their control of the

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<sup>259</sup> *FRUS*, 1961-1963, Vietnam, Volume I, 1961, eds. Ronald D. Landa and Charles S. Sampson (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1988), Document 278. Accessed January 26<sup>th</sup>, 2017. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v01/d278>. The quotations are Nolting’s.

<sup>260</sup> *United States-Vietnam Relations*, Part IV.B.2., 18-19.

country. It seemed as if Diem had successfully played his foreign advisors against one another and gotten what he wanted: funding for his own program to win the war and improve support for his rule.

There was much debate within the advisory community with regard to where the Strategic Hamlet Program should start. The American military preferred War Zone D, an area immediately to the north of Saigon that was considered a Viet Cong stronghold. Thompson wanted to start in the Delta region, or at least a portion of it, as it was where the majority of the South Vietnamese population lived and was also the source of most of its agricultural output. He maintained that the South Vietnamese government should pursue an ink blot-type strategy; government control could extend from areas of concentrated government presence. It was a slow, methodical process, perhaps too slow for the American advisors, who tended to want more immediate results to gain the initiative against the communists.<sup>261</sup>

The South Vietnamese, however, preferred Binh Duong, a province to the north of Saigon that contained important Viet Cong communication and supply routes.<sup>262</sup> By advocating for Binh Duong, an area the Ngos considered strategically important and in which they were already pursuing some pacification efforts, the GVN wished “to commit the Americans to support of Diem’s government on terms which would be in fact acceptable to that government and would—equally important—appear to be U.S. support for GVN-initiated actions.”<sup>263</sup> During discussions with the chief of MAAG, Diem drew upon Thompson’s belief that a sweep through War Zone D, which spanned more than

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<sup>261</sup> Thompson, *Make for the Hills*, 129-130.

<sup>262</sup> *United States-Vietnam Relations*, Part IV.B.2., 15.

<sup>263</sup> *Ibid.* Emphasis added by Pentagon Papers author.

one province, would prove ineffective, potentially damaging ARVN's morale.<sup>264</sup>

Ultimately, the South Vietnamese president's argument proved persuasive, and the Americans agreed to support Diem's choice of Binh Duong as the starting point for the Strategic Hamlet Program.<sup>265</sup>

Operation Sunrise began on March 1962 but ran into early difficulties.<sup>266</sup> While ARVN forces met little resistance, once the GVN began construction of the new settlements, only seventy families out of 205 voluntarily relocated to the strategic hamlet. The others were forcibly relocated, and previous settlements, regardless if the inhabitants had moved willingly or not, were destroyed, in part to discourage families from leaving the new strategic hamlets.<sup>267</sup> A correspondent from *The New York Times* reported, "This harsh, desperate measure was approved by the Americans because it worked so well for the British in Malaya. There, the forced resettlement of a half-million people was the turning point in the British defeat of the Communists."<sup>268</sup> However, as only 120 military-aged males were found amongst the families, it seemed as if many of the others had (willingly or not) joined the Viet Cong guerillas.<sup>269</sup> Despite these inauspicious beginnings, the program quickly expanded to a national level, and while resettlement efforts continued in some areas, in others, existing hamlets and villages were fortified.<sup>270</sup>

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<sup>264</sup> *United States-Vietnam Relations*, Part IV.B.2., 16.

<sup>265</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>266</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>267</sup> Homer Bigart, "U.S. Helps Vietnam in Test of Strategy Against Guerillas," *The New York Times*, March 29<sup>th</sup>, 1962, accessed February 19<sup>th</sup>, 2017, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1962/03/29/83221129.html?pageNumber=1>.

<sup>268</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>269</sup> Bigart, "U.S. Helps Vietnam in Test of Strategy Against Guerillas."

<sup>270</sup> *United States-Vietnam Relations*, Part IV.B.2., 24.

By the end of 1962, the Diem regime maintained that more than thirty-three percent of the South Vietnamese population lived in strategic hamlets.<sup>271</sup>

As the program gained pace, and as more and more hamlets and villages were fortified across the country, Americans worked to evaluate the effectiveness of the program. Generally, evaluations focused on the construction aspect of the Strategic Hamlet Program and not on the subsequent delivery of government services.<sup>272</sup> Pro- and anti-Diem American observers emphasized different statistics. Diem supporters within the advisory community discussed numbers that portrayed an increase in the number of hamlets constructed and a fall in the number of incidents initiated by the Viet Cong.<sup>273</sup> Opponents, on the other hand, pointed to examples of farmers forced to construct new settlements and any lapses in the Diem regime's compensation to peasants for property destroyed during the resettlement process.<sup>274</sup>

The principal concern of the foreigners in Saigon soon proved to be the speed at which Nhu constructed new strategic hamlets. His rapidity resulted in especial concern for Thompson, who saw it as a recipe for disaster. It was Nhu's apparent abandonment of the intended deliberate pace of hamlet construction that caused Thompson to eventually disown the program. During a cocktail party at the American ambassador's house in Saigon, Nhu referred to Thompson as "the father of the programme."<sup>275</sup> Thompson, upset that "the proliferation of strategic hamlets was being carried out to a point of absurdity and was endangering the earlier more secure areas," answered that he "did not

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<sup>271</sup> *United States-Vietnam Relations*, Part IV.B.2., 28.

<sup>272</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>273</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>274</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>275</sup> Thompson, *Make for the Hills*, 139.



recognize these children.”<sup>276</sup> For his part, Nhu “distrusted [Thompson] as having the outlook of a colonial administrator.”<sup>277</sup>

Several years later, Thompson looked back at the program’s execution and concluded: “The major weakness in the Vietnamese implementation of the Strategic Hamlet Programme was that it had no strategic direction, with the result that strategic hamlets were created haphazardly all over the country, and in no area was there a really solid block of them.”<sup>278</sup> In his opinion, the strategic hamlets were too isolated from one another to provide mutual support or create an area in which the insurgents would find little to no assistance from the local inhabitants. Comparing the situation in South Vietnam with the one he had experienced in Malaya, Thompson wrote, “It took over three years to establish 500 defended Chinese villages in Malaya. In less than two years in Vietnam over 8,000 strategic hamlets were created, the majority of them in the first nine months of 1963. No attention was paid to their purpose; their creation became the purpose in itself.”<sup>279</sup>

Meanwhile, the United States continued to provide support for the program. However, while many American officials agreed with it in principal, some also began to question its direction. One author of the Pentagon Papers commented that to the Americans, “As brother Nhu visibly took the reins controlling the program and began to solidify control over the Youth Corps [a Can Lao-affiliated group used to spread Personalism] it became increasingly clear that Diem was emphasizing government

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<sup>276</sup> Thompson, *Make for the Hills*, 139.

<sup>277</sup> Ahern, Jr., 150.

<sup>278</sup> Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency*, 141.

<sup>279</sup> *Ibid.*

control of the peasantry at the expense (at least in US eyes) of pacification.”<sup>280</sup> While the number of Vietnamese living in strategic hamlets increased, the actual effectiveness of the program, and whether the Diem regime was sacrificing quantity for quality, was a matter of perspective and debate.<sup>281</sup>

That the effectiveness of the Strategic Hamlet Program depended on the perspective of the viewer demonstrates the difficulty in determining whether or not it was successful at winning the hearts and minds of the South Vietnamese people. However, the program’s creation was a rare moment of agreement between the various advisors and the Diem regime, and it was a moment created by Thompson and exploited by Diem. BRIAM and Thompson’s presence in Saigon, and their initiative in pushing the Delta Plan through Taylor to Kennedy, created an opportunity for Diem to gain American support for a counterinsurgency plan that had (from his perspective) the primary objective of solidifying his control of the countryside.

Although the Strategic Hamlet Program resembled Thompson’s Delta Plan, it differed in size and scope. BRIAM’s plan was contained to the Delta, an area that—once secured—would be a jump-off point for future pacification efforts, but Nhu quickly transformed the program into a nationwide operation. Perhaps most crucially, whereas the Delta Plan was concerned with securing the population in order to deliver social services and win hearts and minds, Diem and Nhu concentrated on controlling the population by moving them into strategic hamlets. Controlling and securing the population involved the same resettlement tactics but with different intents. Thompson

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<sup>280</sup> *United States-Vietnam Relations*, Part IV.B.2., 30. Emphasis added by Pentagon Papers author.

<sup>281</sup> *Ibid.*, 31, 34-36.

wanted to win support through a demonstration of government services. Nhu wanted to indoctrinate his citizens through state programs with the design of inculcating the tenets of Personalism into the nation.

Ultimately, the Strategic Hamlet Program ended with the Ngo brothers' death in November 1963.<sup>282</sup> While it had continued to expand throughout 1962 and 1963, the program—and Nhu's indoctrination efforts—coincided with other political crises, particularly the growing agitation within South Vietnam's large Buddhist population. That crisis would prove the Ngos' downfall.

While Diem and Nhu responded to the Buddhists' protests with increasingly autocratic measures, President Kennedy, influenced by several key civilian officials in his administration, reflecting the continued existence of several factions within the American mission, supported the ARVN coup in November 1963. Diem and Nhu were killed in the process, murdered by an ARVN officer in the back of an armored personnel carrier.

Possibly the greatest critique of the Strategic Hamlet Program is that many hamlets were abandoned after the Ngo brothers were killed.<sup>283</sup> However, it would not be the last time that the Americans would support efforts to win hearts and minds. In the last years of the United States' involvement, General Abrams would encourage similar GVN programs to win the villages and hamlets scattered across South Vietnam.<sup>284</sup>

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<sup>282</sup> *United States-Vietnam Relations*, Part IV.B.2., 35.

<sup>283</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>284</sup> Sorley, *A Better War*, 10.

## CHAPTER V – CONCLUSION

In *A Better War*, Lewis Sorley discussed the changes General Abrams made to the American war effort from 1969-1973. Sorley maintained that Abrams's policy of one war and Vietnamization turned the United States' effort around, and if the Americans had pursued similar policies during the Westmoreland era, Sorley argued, then America might have been more successful in the Vietnam War.

However, Sorley ignored the earlier efforts the Americans and British made during the Diem regime. Rather than being an American puppet, Diem and his brother Nhu were Vietnamese nationalists who tried to juggle their sovereign ambitions with their need for financial and military support from the United States. The conflicting priorities of the United States' mission made this more difficult. American advisors, diplomats, intelligence officers, and politicians in Washington and Saigon generally shared the same goal of maintaining a pro-west South Vietnam, but each group had different opinions as to how that should be accomplished.

These fissures and disputes would ultimately contribute to the coup that cost Diem and Nhu their lives. But even before that fateful day in November 1963, disagreements between different advisors often prevented the establishment of a generally agreed upon policy for success in Vietnam. Robert Thompson and BRIAM filled that void. Invited by Diem after diplomatic maneuvering by the United Kingdom, the South Vietnamese president saw the British presence as a potential counterweight to American influence. Similarly, Thompson arrived with the notion that the Americans did not have the right expertise to defeat the communists in Vietnam. He, on the other hand,

believed he had valuable experience gained from the Malayan Emergency that could provide special insight that might bring victory in Southeast Asia.

Thompson's Delta Plan, therefore, was the perfect opportunity for Diem to show his American backers that he was willing to follow foreign advice while still maintaining his sovereignty. The Delta Plan was, to a certain extent, a bigger and more organized version of earlier French and South Vietnamese programs. That these programs had not been successful seems not to have dissuaded the Americans, British, and the Diem regime from trying them again. Rather, they became an opportunity for the Diem regime to attempt to strengthen its hold on the country.

At the same time, Thompson's Delta Plan, which the South Vietnamese were already executing to a certain degree, was reflected in Abrams's policy of Vietnamization. Indeed, the counterinsurgency strategies of the Ngos, Thompson, and Abrams all emphasized Vietnamese-led efforts to win hearts and minds at the village and hamlet level. Like Diem, Thompson, and several of their American contemporaries, Abrams saw any primarily military solution to the insurgency as treating the symptoms, rather than the cause, of the insurgency. Only by winning the people of South Vietnam to the cause of the government in Saigon could the GVN and its American backers be victorious, Abrams realized—mirroring the policy pursued several years before during the advisory period. Ultimately, Thompson's plan was both an early version of Abrams's better war and an opportunity for Diem to pursue his own counterinsurgency plan while maintaining American fiscal and military support for his regime. BRIAM's presence in Saigon added another player to the South Vietnamese political milieu, one that Diem was

able to manipulate in his efforts to walk the razor's edge that separated a stable government from a successful coup on the Cold War's frontline.

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