



How They Won

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HOW THEY WON

/ Jeffrey Race*

One of the most remarkable features of the current conflict in Viet Nam is the ability of the forces opposed to the Saigon government, now consisting of some 240,000 men under arms, to fight to an apparent stand-still a combined Vietnamese and foreign military force some seven times their own size. They have done this without advanced weapons, without aircraft, without modern communications, without a massive economic assistance program, and without a single grain of miracle rice. Similarly by early 1965 the revolutionary movement was apparently within a few months of the final general counteroffensive which would have swept into the cities destroying the few surviving vestiges of the Saigon government. This was accomplished with manpower largely of southern origin, and in the face of massive foreign assistance to the Saigon government which in the preceding decade had provided hundreds of millions of dollars of economic and military aid, had completely retrained and re-equipped Saigon's military and police forces, and had supplemented this extensive material aid with an advisory effort exceeding 10,000 military and civilian personnel. How was this possible? The following pages recount the findings of a study intended to answer this question. This study examined side-by-side the efforts of both the revolutionary movement and the Saigon government over a fifteen-year period in Long An province of the Mekong Delta, in order to discover what differences in approach permitted the revolutionary movement to accomplish, with such sparse human and material resources, what the Saigon government failed to accomplish with such a comparative wealth of resources. These findings are based on the factors which led to the collapse of the Saigon government's presence in Long An province by early 1965, but they may be carried over into the present period to explain the remarkable per-

*This article summarizes some of the findings of a longer parallel study, now in preparation, of both the revolutionary movement and the Saigon government over a fifteen-year period in Long An province of the Mekong Delta. This study was carried out by the author as a private individual, without the sponsorship or financial support of any institution or organization. Major sources included interviews with all but two of the province chiefs of Long An from 1953 through 1968, two of the highest-ranking members of the Lao Dong Party to come into government hands, captured internal Party documents and training materials located by the author in Saigon government archives, and other materials in the public domain. Regrettably considerations of space have precluded citation of evidence to support the points made here, and have also made necessary a substantial abbreviation in the treatment of several important conceptual issues
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formance of the revolutionary forces today in the face of the large-scale intervention of foreign combat troops.

Three categories of differences proved to have been pivotal in the victory of the revolutionary movement in Long An by early 1965: strategic differences, organizational differences, and policy differences. While in fact the activities of each side in these three categories were necessarily complementary, for ease of discussion they will be recounted here separately.

THE STRATEGY OF VICTORY VERSUS THE STRATEGY OF DEFEAT

If we were challenged to account in a single sentence for the key to the victory of the revolutionary movement in Long An, we could accurately answer: it was the *comprehensive view of revolution as a stage-by-stage social process* possessed by the communist leadership of the movement. The level of sophistication of communist strategic thought was never matched on the government side. Instead the government's one-dimensional conception of a multi-dimensional process ensured its defeat regardless of the resources available to it.

What were the elements of this communist strategy of victory? To comprehend this it is necessary to understand the way the communist leadership conceptualized the problem. Perhaps most fundamental to their conceptualization was the idea of forces in conflict, with "forces" having an explicitly social and not a military content. While the idea of a "social force" is a general one, it is nevertheless true that under certain conditions social forces may be transformed into military forces. In either case the concept of force as used in communist writings carries with it the idea of a group of people capable of acting so as to determine the actions of others, whether by persuasion, coercion or by other means, e.g., as in the expression "the political forces of the masses."

Inherent in this concept of force is the fact that a force cannot be created by compulsion. To believe otherwise is to be caught in a logical paradox: who is to compel the compellers? While it is true that an organized force may exploit some unwilling individuals, these unwilling individuals can only be a part—and obviously not the motive part—of the organization. Since a force cannot arise from compulsion, it must arise from motivation. Motivation in turn derives, in communist thought, from social contradictions. Political activity is the maximizing of one's own forces, and the minimizing of the enemy's forces, by the manipulation of contradictions.

By expanding on this concept of force, we may visualize a society as composed of numerous contending forces, the distribution of which for and against the *status quo* is referred to in communist doctrinal materials as the "balance of forces." Inherent in this concept of the balance of forces is the idea of a *power relationship*, i.e., the relative ability of the contending forces to enforce their will on an opponent. In its most primitive formulation this power relationship is determined by sheer numbers on each side.

However, there are a number of factors which directly or indirectly alter the fundamental power relationship established by simple numbers. These are, for example:

- * Technological factors such as weaponry and communications;
- * Organizational factors, i.e., the extent to which efforts of numerous individuals can be concentrated on one object, or to which the efforts of an opponent can be fragmented;
- * Spatial factors;
- * Economic factors;
- * External factors, i.e., those affecting the ease of support or intervention by external forces.

Consequently the concept of balance of forces is a complex of two distinct and independent concepts: a *force ratio*, or roughly the number of people on each side; and a *power ratio*, or the ratio of effectiveness of each side's operatives after taking into account the impact of power-augmenting factors.

The usefulness of the concept of balance of forces is demonstrated by its ability to resolve certain puzzling situations which are unaccountable in other conceptual schemes. The most obvious among these is how the Party may "control" a hamlet with only one local guerrilla, while the government is unable to do so with continuous battalion sweeps through the hamlet area. By employing this concept of force we can see that the lonely guerrilla represents a *monopoly of force* in his hamlet, except for the few hours a month during which the government battalion is sweeping through. On the other hand, the battalion *does not even represent a force* as defined, since the only means by which a battalion can determine the actions of others—the threat of violence—is ineffective if the battalion is present only a few hours. In the same way artillery and air power, though they represent considerable expenditures of resources, may not represent forces as defined, or they may represent much weaker forces than a single man on the ground in the right place.

The concept of security as it is employed in communist doctrine also differs markedly from the concept of the same name employed in conventional Western military thought. While the concept is nowhere explicitly defined in communist literature, it is nevertheless absolutely central to the differing performances of government and anti-government efforts in Long An.

In a tactical sense any piece of terrain, any installation or any group of people can be secured by a sufficient concentration of military forces. While this foundation of security may be valid for any limited number of pieces of terrain, installations, or groups of people, it obviously cannot be valid when applied to a whole theater or national unit. There is a logical contradiction in "concentrating one's forces everywhere," since concentration means centralizing dispersed forces in a limited number of locations. Thus

security as it applies to a theater or national unit must have a different foundation.

The foundation of security in a strategic sense is a *sympathetic environment*, i.e., an environment—the population—composed of sympathetic and neutral elements, and from which the hostile elements have been removed. It can be seen that a sympathetic environment throughout the theater of operations leads to the same result as would the concentration of forces “everywhere,” but at much lower costs, since the network of sympathizers reveals the presence of enemy forces, permitting one to displace one’s forces to avoid attack or to concentrate one’s forces to defend against or to conduct an attack.

Integral to this concept of security is *maintaining the legal position of the population*, a measure constantly emphasized in communist policy and training documents. The legal position of the population is maintained by not demanding of the population overt actions which would make it the object of attack or reprisal by the government. Since the population is not the object of attack or reprisal by the government, it need not be protected. Although the population will be subject to contact by the government, no undesirable consequences will flow from this since the population will have been immunized against government appeals by appropriate policies.¹ The corollary to the legal position of the population is the *illegal position of the apparatus*, i.e., overt forces. This illegal position demands of it a different life style, that of an “outlaw,” with no fixed residence, constantly subject to sudden and perhaps ugly death. The sharp break involved in the transition from a legal to an illegal status demands a much higher level of commitment among those who elect the latter, and thus there is a “threshold” effect involved in the creation of an illegal apparatus.

This definition of security allows communist strategists to define sharply the role of military activity. In general terms the role of military activity, as of every other kind of activity, must be to diminish enemy forces, and to augment one’s own. The relative emphasis between the two, and the means by which they are accomplished, are dependent on objective conditions as well as on the stage of the conflict. During the early stages the principal role of military activity is a defensive one to develop forces through protecting the process of political activity. Only to a limited extent, particularly during the latter stages of a communist revolution, are the traditional means of altering the balance of forces—offensive combat—the principal means.

We can see that in comparison with the conventional concept of security discussed above, this concept of security and the special role it assigns to military activity during a substantial span of the revolutionary process allows for an enormous economy of force. With no need to protect the population, all military resources can be devoted to protecting the process of political activity or to an offensive role in attacking the enemy.

¹What these appropriate policies of the revolutionary movement were, and why government “development” policies were not an appropriate response, is discussed below.

The communist concept of victory is an extremely simple one: a decisive superiority in the balance of forces, i.e., the unchallengeable ability to determine the actions of all within a specified domain, be it a hamlet or a nation. At any point less than a decisive superiority, the relative influence of each side will be in proportion to the balance of forces existing in the domain in question.

With these concepts in mind it is possible to outline the successful communist strategy in Long An, yet even here it is necessary to make another distinction: between social strategy and military strategy. The communist social strategy was an integrated program for the *motivation* of forces, while the communist military strategy was an integrated program for the *application* of forces. Logically the former is fundamental to and governs the latter.

The successful military strategy employed by the Party in Long An was derived from the basic prescriptions laid down by Mao Tse-tung for warfare in a backward agricultural country: contest the urban areas, gain victory in the rural areas, through a worker-peasant alliance. Since the countryside is the "heart" which pumps human and material resources into the government, its initial loss will destroy the defensibility of the urban areas which it may first have been necessary to concede. By seizing the rural areas initially, the government is forever precluded from developing sufficient forces to achieve victory on a national scale.

Yet what is victory? It is the achievement of a decisive superiority in the balance of forces. In the context of Viet Nam, "victory in the rural areas" meant achieving a decisive superiority in the balance of forces at the village and hamlet levels, the only units of social and geographical significance to the rural Vietnamese. Thus, the very condition for victory on a national scale was the prior victory in a certain number of the 12,000 hamlets of rural Viet Nam. It is extremely significant that these victories were obtained for the most part not during the military phase, but rather during the pre-military phase of intense political activity to establish a favorable balance of social forces (i.e., popular sympathy for a "just cause"). Once this had been accomplished, it generally only took the threat of violence to cause the local government apparatus to collapse: in Long An, only 26 local officials were assassinated at the start of the new policy in January, 1960; yet this small number, reinforced by a continuing low level of assassinations afterwards, was sufficient to cripple the government apparatus at the village and hamlet level.² Within a comparatively short time, the government's strategic position was hopeless, although the actual translation

²This sharp transition by the revolutionary movement from a policy of non-violence to a policy of violence is described in my article "The Party Origins of the Second Indochina War," *Asian Survey*, X:5 (May 1970), pp. 359-382. The preparatory period of intense political activity was the three-year span from 1957 through 1959, following promulgation by the Central Committee in Hanoi of the major strategy document "The Path of the Revolution in the South."

of the government's political defeat into a definitive military defeat took another five years.

The military strategy just elaborated has often been described before. Although it was a significant element in the communist victory, it was by no means the distinguishing or even the most important aspect of the communist approach to revolutionary war. The decisive and yet least explored factor in the communist success was its social strategy.

The most useful characterization of the communist social strategy is that it was strongly *preemptive*. That is, although the Party's natural base of support according to Marxist doctrine lay in the urban proletariat, the Party developed policies to preclude the government from motivating certain other social classes comprising the great majority of the country's population. By developing policies more congenial to the interests of these classes than the policies of the government, the Party ensured that when the conflict crossed into the military phase the majority of the population would choose to fight against the government in defense of its own interests, or would at least not choose to fight against the Party. In practice, the preempted classes in the rural areas were the landless, poor and middle peasants, who were the objects of "winning over" (*tranh thu*). Vigorous efforts were made not to alienate the rich peasants, although the best that was generally hoped for was their "neutralization." The landlord class, representing only a small percentage of the population, was willingly conceded to the government, although attempts were made to recruit even among the "patriotic" landlords.

The Party's successful preemption of its target classes, through certain policies discussed below, ensured that government efforts to escalate militarily rebounded against the government itself. While the government could effectively motivate the minority of the population in the social classes whose interests would be harmed under the society represented by the revolutionary movement, every attempt to demand counter revolutionary efforts from the preempted classes simply drove them into the arms of the revolutionary movement. Moreover, the onus for forcing the jump lay upon the government and thus was doubly damaging.

In contrast to the Party's multi-dimensional view of the situation as one of managed social conflict, manifesting itself at a certain stage in military form, government officials did not possess a consistent theoretical view of the situation confronting them. Their understanding was seriously hampered by their view of the situation as the attempted overthrow of the government, whereas the full dimensions of the process only come into view when it is conceptualized as the attempted overthrow of the existing social system itself. The social system is here used in the sense of a system which, among other things, defines and maintains a particular distribution of values within a human community. By mistaking a part of the process for the whole, government officials overlooked the key operative factors—those personal motivations which lead people to favor one social system over

another. Consequently, most of the areas mentioned above—social class, contradiction, balance of forces, revolution as a stage-by-stage social process—were represented in the minds of government officials by what must be called, for lack of a better term, blank areas of consciousness. While individual officials each had favorite “explanations”—terror, invasion from the North, corruption, inadequate material aid by the government—none had a comprehensive and consistent theoretical interpretation of events, Marxist or otherwise.

The phenomena which government officials took to define the whole problem—assassinations, threats, kidnappings—were actually just epiphenomena of a social process of which they had no conception. A concern with these superficial manifestations was in fact the sole thread of consistency running through the thoughts of all the province chiefs of Long An: an overt threat to “physical security” which had to be handled by suppressive means. This reaction by the government had been anticipated by the communist leadership and was indeed one of the critical requirements for the success of the Party’s own strategy, since the latter’s continued generation of forces depended on the counterproductive effects of the government’s own measures.

The actual strategy which the government adopted in its attempts to prevent a communist takeover was only articulated to any appreciable degree in the military domain. It might be summarized as an urban-based strategy involving the abandonment of the rural areas and withdrawal into populated centers. These were then to be employed as bases for a gradually widening net of operations into rural areas, or the so-called “oil-spot” theory. According to this strategy as communist units were worn down, the heavier government military units could be moved onto a wider perimeter, with their place being taken by police or paramilitary organizations, which could maintain sufficient security to reestablish the local organs of government.

It can be seen that the conceptual categories on which this strategy was based, i.e., the use of a tactical conception of security for an entire national unit, and the concept of “protecting the population,” created terrific demands for military and police forces—demands which it was impossible to meet once the threat became widespread. In practice there were only enough troops to protect physical installations, not the population. It should also be apparent that the aspects of government military strategy most often criticized by foreign observers—the endless repetition of fortifications and large troop units in static defensive roles—were consequences of the government’s confusion of tactical and strategic conceptions of security.

The reason it proved impossible to develop sufficient forces to carry out this military strategy with a greater degree of success is that there simply was nothing in the planning of government thinkers analogous to the communist social strategy, i.e., an explicit and conscious reordering among various social groups to motivate the forces required for whatever military strategy had been decided upon. The best description of the course adopted

by the government is that it was a pure *reinforcement* strategy, which might be defined as it applied to the government as one which acted only in ways to consolidate and strengthen the existing distribution of values. The government reaction to such acts as assassinations, kidnappings, and armed propaganda meetings was to strengthen its apparatus for their suppression—through physical reinforcement (barbed wire and barricades, arming holders of power), numerical reinforcement (military recruitment, compulsory membership in mass organizations), and restrictive measures on the population (curfews, movement controls). It was a reinforcement, and not a reordering, of the existing system.

In conclusion then, we can see that the fundamental difference between the strategies adopted by the Party and the government was this: the Party adopted a strategy heavily weighted toward *preemptive* measures. i.e., those which sought to shift the power relationship between the government and itself by shifting the underlying balance of social forces, i.e., the force ratio; in contrast the government strategy, consisting principally of reinforcement measures, sought to alter this power relationship by manipulating such factors as weaponry, training, etc., i.e., by shifting the power ratio.

The Dynamics of Preemptive and Reinforcement Strategies: Analyzing situations of social conflict in terms of preemptive and reinforcement measures allows us to make certain predictions as to their evolution and also allows us to pinpoint the important factors in that evolution. Assuming no collapse of will by either side, every conflict situation which begins in a state of low mobilization³ has an inherent dynamic of escalation, until either one side gains victory or an equilibrium of forces (stalemate) is reached. The level of mobilization at which victory or stalemate will occur will depend on:

- The depth of the social conflicts which each side is capable of manipulating to generate forces;
- the effectiveness of the opposing forces;
- the conflict-aggravating consequences of mobilization and their relative impacts on each side.

If in combination these three variables are sufficient, then the situation will be one of open-ended escalation, i.e., proceeding to full mobilization.

Referring specifically to the situation of a government threatened by revolution, a variety of strategies might be selected by the government, ranging from a pure reinforcement strategy to a pure preemptive strategy, or any number of combinations of the two. A pure reinforcement strategy

³Mobilization is not used here in the sense of "social mobilization" explicated by Karl Deutsch, but rather in the earlier limited sense of formal enlistment into some kind of collective effort, e.g., being drafted into a military organization. It thus might be desired by the person mobilized or it might not.

as applied to the government would dictate only those measures which strengthened the defenses of the existing system, e.g., by barbed wire, by arming holders of power, by incarcerating or killing opponents of the existing system; a pure preemptive strategy would dictate only those measures which reallocated values in such a way as to eliminate the motives for revolution, e.g., by admitting new groups to political power, by decentralization of authority, by reallocation of wealth or income in favor of certain groups. The important thing which this analysis into preemptive and reinforcement strategies allows us to note is that the more heavily weighted toward reinforcement is the selected strategy, the higher the level of mobilization (and potential or actual violence) toward which the situation will escalate. This is another way of saying that the cost of maintaining the *status quo* in the face of opposition is a higher level of mobilization and potential or actual violence.

A hypothetical example will illustrate this point. Assume a water-scarce situation, say a desert, in which ten percent of the population monopolizes all the water wells. If faced with violence by the remaining ninety percent of the population, the ten percent might devote its resources to a pure reinforcement strategy, e.g., fortifications, military patrols, etc., or it might devote its resources to a pure preemptive strategy by digging more wells and sharing its water with everyone, or it might choose some intermediate course, say by sharing with an additional thirty percent of the population and suppressing the remaining sixty percent. Depending on objective conditions, a number of courses might result in an equilibrium, but the more heavily reinforcement was stressed, the higher the level of continuous mobilization which would be required—at least until the excluded portion of the population died of thirst.

The government leadership in Long An, however, made no careful analysis and no conscious decision to adopt a pure reinforcement strategy, since it was insensitive to the social bases of the situation which confronted it. In this the thinking in Long An accurately reflected the thinking in Saigon. On the other hand the communist leadership had explicitly judged that at the current stage of development of Vietnamese society a pure reinforcement strategy, i.e., one based on arming the working class alone, could not possibly succeed. Likewise it had explicitly judged that the existing system could not be defended since it maintained a too-narrow distribution of values. Thus the communist leadership made the conscious decision to adopt a strongly (though not purely) preemptive strategy, or what it referred to as “the strategy of [temporary] alliances by stage” (*sach luoc dong minh giai doan*), of which its front policy is the most outstanding manifestation.

Viewed in these terms we can see why the communist preemptive strategy was a strategy of victory and the government reinforcement strategy (i.e., what Mao Tse-tung refers to with scorn as the “weapons decide everything” strategy) contained a built-in dynamic of defeat. If the assumption is valid

that by 1960 the majority of the rural population had been preempted from voluntary mobilization by the government—and succeeding pages will show why this was so—then no matter to what level the government chose to escalate, it could never achieve sufficient forces for victory. In fact the forces which the Party employed to overthrow the system were generated by just those measures which the government took in the mistaken belief that it was defending the system: restrictions on movement, an annoying system of identification cards, compulsory mass organizations, the national draft, the agrovillage, the strategic hamlets.

COMMUNITY-ORIENTED ORGANIZATION VERSUS CENTRALLY-ORIENTED ORGANIZATION

The strategic differences outlined above manifested themselves in a number of critical organizational differences between the opposing sides in Long An: differing missions, differing numerical strengths at certain levels, and differing loci of authority.

One fundamental difference between the communist and government organizations lay in their differing missions. On the communist side, the criterion for judging an organization's effectiveness was how well its efforts contributed to *political activity*, i.e., the manipulation of contradictions to motivate forces. Any specialized functions were clearly and directly subordinated, and never allowed to conflict with that supreme goal. On the other hand the government apparatus in the rural areas was fundamentally an administrative organization, intended to manage a system assumed to be viable. It is interesting to note by contrast that communist training materials specifically warn against allowing the Party apparatus to become "merely an administrative organization." This asymmetry in mission had two important consequences: first, it allowed the Party to concentrate all of its human resources on the critical task of altering the balance of forces; second, it obscured for the central government the actual impact on the balance of forces of its own administrative activities, which were often perceived by the local communities as damaging to their own interests.

Another remarkable difference between communist and government organizations, aside from the fact that their efforts were directed into fundamentally differing tasks, is the fact that at the only levels of social significance in rural Viet Nam (i.e., hamlet and village) the Party motivated five to ten times more manpower than the government. On the other hand, it was at district and province level that government manpower was concentrated, as extensions of the central ministries. The Ministry of Information, for example, had an office in the province capital of Tan An, and branch offices in the district capitals, each staffed by three or four personnel. With these staffing levels, and with the emphasis which existed on office-centered activity, visits by Ministry of Information cadres to each hamlet took place on an average of once a month or less prior to 1960.

A third significant difference was the differing loci of authority in the communist and government hierarchies. Within the government hierarchy, the province chief and to a lesser extent district chiefs were the principal decision makers—although frequently extremely minor matters were beyond even their competence.

On the other hand in Party doctrine and practice the village *chi bo* or “Party branch” was the most important echelon and the one at which the initial and usually binding decisions were made. For example, in such matters as taxation, justice, military recruitment, and land redistribution, a communist village secretary had as much and often far more discretionary authority than a government province chief.

A specific example, the critical issue of land, will illustrate the importance of the *chi bo* and its relatively greater authority compared to a government village council. Under communist practice land redistribution was essentially a local matter, decided by local people at the village level. Final approval of land redistribution technically lay with the Party province committee, but this was routine and seldom changed what had been decided in the village on the basis of the villagers’ own perception of their needs. By contrast, the government land redistribution was carried out by cadres of the central government, on the basis of an inflexible law which made no provision for the differing needs of each locality.⁴ Final authority legally and practically lay with the Ministry in Saigon. The initial benefits of the government land redistribution (insignificant as they were) took three years to arrive in Long An, while communist land redistribution procedures were never reported to have taken more than three months to accomplish.

Thus under government organization the critical decisions affecting people’s lives were made initially at the very lowest level by the district chief, and usually—as in the case of land redistribution—at a much higher level, on the basis of relatively inflexible laws or regulations adopted by the central government. In contrast, the revolutionary organization ensured that critical decisions affecting popular livelihood were made by local people, relatively more flexibly and with some sensitivity to the demands of the particular situation.

Up to this point the discussion has focused exclusively on the political organs of both sides. Military organization also showed certain significant differences which had important consequences for the effectiveness and appeal of the two sides.

During the period through 1965 manpower for the government regular army was obtained through a draft system. Upon induction draftees were sent to the national training center just outside Saigon for basic training, after which they might be sent to serve anywhere in the country. Only rarely

⁴A significant confirmation of this point lies in the fact that in only one province of Central Viet Nam did any land even fall under the provisions of the government’s redistribution law.

was service in one's home province. Youths could volunteer to serve in the local militia but on reaching a certain age still had to enter the regular army and leave home. Such a system of service far from one's home goes completely against traditional Vietnamese preferences, and accounts for the cases in which even members of the local militia would desert when called for service in the regular army.

With this in mind it is interesting to note that the communist system of recruitment was based on an entirely different principle known as *don quan*, which might be translated as "promotion by echelon." Under the *don quan* system, military service began with service as a hamlet guerrilla. As the inductee's military proficiency and "political consciousness" developed (and the latter was given attention equal to the former) he was promoted from echelon to echelon, serving progressively farther and farther from home. Rarely however would anyone ever have to serve outside his home province. According to interviews with defectors, during most of the period discussed thus far "promotion" in this way was considered a mark of prestige and eagerly sought, at least by those who did not have family responsibilities. The advantages of this system, both from the standpoint of morale and from the standpoint of familiarity with terrain and population, are obvious.

We may conclude that on the basis of these important organizational differences alone it was not surprising that the revolutionary movement was able to develop greater forces than the government in rural Viet Nam: the revolutionary movement devoted more manpower, and more authority, to the critical levels and to the critical kinds of activity. Beyond organizational factors, however, an equally important reason was the social origin of the decision-makers in the revolutionary movement and the policies on which their decisions were based, which are discussed in the next section.

POLICIES OF "LOOKING DOWN" VERSUS POLICIES OF "LOOKING UP"

Others have commented on "the organizational weapon" or "the organizational genius" of the Party, as though there were a magic organizational structure capable of overcoming all obstacles, the knowledge of which is possessed only by the Party. Such a view is misleading. The Party's demonstrated organizational superiority has come about not through attention to treatises on effective organization, but rather through the development of social policies leading to superior motivation. Neither the communist strategy nor the communist organization just outlined could have existed without implementing social policies that resulted from the differing social organization which the revolutionary movement represented. For the Central Committee in Hanoi to calculate that it had to motivate ten times more manpower than the government at the village level—and to issue orders to that effect—was a simple intellectual and administrative exercise. On the other hand the actual ability of the Party's agents in the field to carry out these orders was contingent on the existence of the proper policies.

The policies which made possible the victory of the revolutionary movement, in the judgment of those who actually took part in bringing it about, can be grouped for ease of discussion in three general categories: policies redistributive of wealth and income, policies redistributive of power and status, and policies of provocation and protection.

Policies Redistributive of Wealth and Income: The economic policies of the revolutionary movement favored different groups in rural Viet Nam from those favored under government policies. In rural Viet Nam the economic issue of overwhelming significance was land—the principal means of livelihood. The distinction between the revolutionary and the government land policies and the actual beneficiaries of each have been discussed in detail elsewhere. It is enough to note that in its overall impact the revolutionary land program achieved a far broader distribution of land than did the government program.

The issue of land is clearly one on which the government officials were victims of their own propaganda—they simply denied, for the most part, that the Party had given out any land. Officials generally were determined that communists “take land” from the people by collectivization. When confronted with the actual figures, such officials responded that the Party did not actually “give” land, but rather turned the people into “slaves of the Party,” with the Party taking everything but that necessary to a minimum subsistence living. Again the facts contradict such an interpretation, as the differing tax policies of the Party and the government clearly show. Communist policy provided for a progressive tax system (*luy tien*), according to ability to pay, while government taxation in rural areas was based principally on use and consumption taxes, e.g., market taxes, sales taxes, fees for issuance of documents, etc. In its actual impact, such a system is regressive, with the heaviest burden proportionately falling on those least able to pay.

The government land tax provides an excellent example of how its tax structure discriminated in favor of the wealthy. Vietnamese land taxes are actually very low, for example eighty-five piasters per hectare on the grade of land which produces 100 *gia* of paddy per hectare a season. In fact the low tax rate was a measure beneficial not to the general population but rather to the minority which held the majority of the land in Long An. The hectare of land on which eighty-five piasters of tax was due produced at the legal rate twenty-five *gia* of rent for the landlord, or 1,250 piasters at the prices prevailing during the period discussed here. Frequently of course the rent was much higher than the legal maximum of twenty-five percent. Since the tenant was responsible for the maintenance of the land and its irrigation works in their original condition, the landlord's only expense was the eighty-five piaster land tax. During 1962 the communist tax on a family with six children farming two hectares would have been about two *gia* or 100 piasters, in contrast to the fifty *gia* or 2,500

piasters the family would have had to pay the landlord under the government system.

While communist taxes increased significantly from 1965 to 1966 in response to the increased pace of the war, the point had been vividly made for many years to the poor and landless peasants of Long An: they were far better off economically under the policies of the revolutionary movement, since the heavy unearned income which had formerly accrued to the landlord was now retained by the operator.

Policies Redistributive of Power and Status: A second set of policies which made possible the revolutionary movement's victory in Long An were those which provided alternate routes to valued roles for those excluded by the existing system. Valued roles might be said to include power roles and status roles. By power is here meant the ability to influence the critical decisions affecting one's own life. By status is meant the feeling of prestige one acquires by occupying a role approved by one's peers.

As noted in the preceding pages, under the government organization, critical decisions were made at the lowest level by the district chief, or at higher levels by the province chief, regional delegate, etc., all of whom were appointees of the central government. These positions were held initially by civil servants and later by military officers. Advancement to the required civil service rank of *doc su* or entry into the officer corps was conditional on holding the *tu tai* (baccalaureate) degree. Since the baccalaureate was effectively limited to the urban middle and upper classes and the rural landlord and rich peasant classes, the overwhelming majority of the rural population was simply excluded from power over the decisions affecting their own lives. Power instead was exercised by those social elements least capable of empathizing with the rural population, and whose personal interests were in conflict with those whom they ruled.

By contrast the social basis of communist recruitment and promotion was entirely different. *Class origin* was the key criterion, outweighing even technical skills or education in importance. Priority in recruitment and promotion was given to the lowest economic strata, i.e., those most completely excluded from power under the social system maintained by the government. The Party still welcomed membership by those of intellectual background, but promotion came slower for them despite other qualifications, and they were usually given staff instead of leadership positions. They might become members of Party committees, but only after much more rigorous and lengthy testing than a member of worker or peasant origin.

Likewise communist practice was to employ *local* people at every echelon, in contrast to the government practice of forbidding service in one's home area for those exercising significant authority (i.e., district officials and above). Moreover it is significant that even these requirements as to class and local origin were not considered sufficient by the communist leadership to ensure that their organizations were "close to the people." The party thus institutionalized close communication between its organizations and

their constituencies by such enforced working principles as criticism and self-criticism, "from the masses, to the masses," and the requirement that higher-ups in the Party spend considerable time each month living and working among ordinary members of the population (the principle of "the higher-ups go down").

None of these working principles had any counterpart in government practice. The best that can be said of government practice is that it was pervaded by the attitude that the people were objects of distrust (i.e., "simple" and "easily deceived")—to be manipulated at will.

Finally it should be noted that one of the most significant factors in the Party's ability to offer alternate routes to power lay in the continuous promotion system, from the village *chi bo* to the Central Committee, on which the communist vertical organization was based. This is perhaps the most important factor accounting for the great difference in performance of communist and government local organizations: no matter how hard a government village chief worked, he could never hope to be more than a village chief, whereas a poor peasant could hope to become the village secretary, the district secretary or even higher.

In conclusion we may say that the combination of these factors—emphasis on class and local origin, concentration of authority at low levels, institutionalization of communications through specific working principles, a continuous promotion chain—demonstrated clearly that political organization under the new society conformed to majority local interests, whereas the existing government organization was objectively the pawn of "outsiders"—both in the sense of place of birth and sympathy with the local area, and in the sense of following social lifeways and economic interests different from the majority of the rural population.

What of the issue of status? Certainly the government offered numerous roles, such as interfamily group chief, leader of youth and paramilitary organizations, etc. Why were these not status roles? The answer to this question lies in the fact that government mobilization was characterized by involuntarism on the part of the people mobilized, which is another way of saying that membership in government organizations did not relate in a positive way to the interests of the rural population. Membership in government organizations such as the Republican Youth was universal and compulsory, whereas membership in revolutionary organizations during the period through 1965 was largely voluntary—even, remarkably, after the Party's "general mobilization" of July 20, 1964.

But how could the revolutionary movement offer status roles which people voluntarily sought, while the government had to resort to compulsion? Here we must return to the definition of status given above: a feeling of prestige obtained by occupying a role approved by one's peers. The comments of defectors that they joined the movement "for adventure," or "since I was tired of being treated like trash because I was poor" are examples of the status roles available to the rural poor through the revolu-

tionary movement but not through the government. Why, after all, did so few people volunteer to join the government army "for adventure" or because they were "tired of being treated like trash"? Occupying roles in the revolutionary movement was perceived by large elements of the local population as defending its interests, while occupying government roles was perceived as being manipulated by outside forces in opposition to local interests—not to mention that it sometimes involved cooperation with and protection of criminal elements in the government. Thus government roles were not perceived as giving status.

Policies of Provocation and Protection: It was Party policy to provoke the government into repressive and violent actions, such that government repressive acts and demands and government violence would themselves become a major conflict issue, super-imposed on existing distributive conflicts within Vietnamese society. The Party was correct in its judgment that government doctrine, based on the use of reinforcement and not preemptive measures, would drive additional segments of the population into opposition, where they would have no alternative but to follow the Party's leadership. Several examples will show how the Party gained strength from its policies of protection.

Chronologically the first group of individuals who sought the protection of the Party were former members of the Viet Minh who were persecuted—either on an official or a personal basis—by agents of the Diem regime. One gets the impression from talking to Party members who were still active in the South in the days following the regroupment to the North that the majority of those persecuted by the government had actually severed their connection with the revolutionary movement and would have been content to continue that way had they not been hounded into hiding by extortionate demands for payoffs or by the imminence of their death at the hands of the Cong An. Having literally no future under the existing system except imprisonment or death, such individuals had a high incentive to work for its overthrow.

A second significant group of individuals who sought the protection of the Party were youths who wished to avoid entry into the national army. From the viewpoint of these youths, there was no legitimate reason to leave their families to enter military service when they perceived no threat to their families or their villages. The demand of a remote central government for military service in some distant part of the country was viewed in these circumstances as an illegitimate exaction, strengthening communist claims that the Diem regime was preparing for war against the North. While no figures are available for the number of individuals evading the draft in Long An when it was begun in 1957, the number was running at the rate of several hundred a year by 1959. Such individuals formed the pool from which anti-government military units were rapidly expanded in Long An starting at the end of 1959.

A DIFFERENT ANALYTIC PERSPECTIVE

The separation outlined above between strategic, organizational and policy differences was a somewhat artificial distinction introduced to facilitate discussion. We might approach these same subjects from several different perspectives which will illustrate their essential unity.

Contingent Incentives: Communist doctrine correctly identified the fact that the critical element in victory is a superiority of forces, i.e., people willing to take risks to influence the actions of others. To motivate such forces implies rewarding certain kinds of behavior and penalizing others. To do this the Party developed a set of policies described above, the common characteristic of which is that they offered *contingent incentives*. A contingent incentive might be defined as an incentive which is contingent both on certain kinds of behavior by the target individual and on the continued existence of the sponsoring organization. In this way a link of interdependence is created between the two which is as strong as the individual's need for the incentive offered, and as enduring as the contingency.

Examples from each of the three types of policies will demonstrate how they were specifically structured to provide contingent incentives. The first type of policy, relating to economic redistribution, offered an incentive which was contingent from the point of view of the individual's behavior in that each beneficiary of land redistribution only retained his land so long as he did not oppose the revolutionary movement, and indeed only so long as he cooperated with it in required ways. Should he serve as a government spy or fail to pay his taxes, or should his son desert from communist military forces, then his land would be forfeit. Moreover the incentive was contingent from the standpoint of the sponsoring organization, the Party, because of government policy itself: new owners retained their land, and the benefits of a progressive tax system, only so long as the Party was not driven out of the area. Should the government return, so would the old landholding and tax system. This is in fact exactly what happened in 1955, when the government enforced the signing of a rental contract on some 28,000 tenant farmers in Long An, thereby confirming the titles of the former landlords after the Viet Minh redistribution.

A similar situation prevailed with respect to power and status. The power roles and status roles offered by the revolutionary movement were only available to the extent that the individuals behaved in conformity with the criteria established by Party policy, e.g., by leading struggle movements or military units against the government, by maintaining intimate relations with the population, etc. Moreover they were also contingent from the viewpoint of the sponsoring organization because of government policy: were the government to return, the power and status roles would vanish or be filled by others. It is also important to note that at the village and hamlet level the contingent incentives available through the Party were much greater than those available through the government, since the Party maintained

a continuous vertical career structure for both its political and its military organization. In contrast government village and hamlet officials and members of the local militia were at the "peak" of their career structure already: there were no promotion incentives the government could hold out to the individual to take greater risks.

The Party's policies of protection were likewise structured to provide contingent incentives. The Party would only shield those evading the national draft, or those fleeing the Cong An, so long as they in turn cooperated with the revolutionary movement. It would only provide leadership and weapons to resist the strategic hamlet program so long as individuals cooperated to build "combat villages." Yet what had permitted the existence of the policies of protection in the first place was various government policies of persecuting former Viet Minh, of non-local military service, of population resettlement, etc.

What is crucial to observe about each of these policies is that, although the contingency aspect was manipulated by the Party to demand certain kinds of behavior, *the contingency itself was lent by the government*, for example in the landholding and taxation systems it maintained, in its policies of military and administrative recruitment, and in its policies of suppression. This then is the significance of preemption: that it was within the power of the government to cut this link of contingency which shifted social groups against it and in favor of the Party.

Here it is crucial to note why "development" was not a preemptive measure: it did not offer contingent incentives, and therefore it did not motivate forces. Economic development would go on regardless of who won, although it might be delayed while deciding who would win. Thus it simply was not an issue in the struggle. Moreover such development programs as existed brought benefits to members of rural communities (or harm, as was often the case) regardless of their behavior. Thus government programs were focussed largely on providing a general *increment* of wealth or income, whereas what attracted people to the revolutionary movement was that it represented a new society in which there would be an individual *redistribution* of benefits, including power and status as well as material possessions. Thus we can see why development programs failed to prevent the growth of the revolutionary movement in Long An: they were simply *irrelevant to the reasons why people cooperated with the movement*. People were glad to have dispensaries, roads, loans, and farmer's associations, but they went right ahead and cooperated with the revolutionary movement since *the same groups were still going to be at the bottom no matter how much assistance the government provided*.

Motivation was thus a critical difference between government and revolutionary organizations, and it can now be seen why this difference existed. Aside from resolving the threat to their physical survival represented by the government, the revolutionary movement offered redistribution of property for even its lowest-ranking members; similarly it put considerable decision-

making authority at very low levels. These were very high incentives in the view of the elements placed low in the social scale from among whom the movement recruited its leadership in the rural areas. In contrast decision-making authority was placed at a much higher level in the centralized government structure, and recruitment was principally from elements much higher in the scale of social stratification. Motivation was thus correspondingly lower. *The much greater differential between incentives offered and social standing of the recruited groups permitted the revolutionary movement to motivate much larger numbers of people than the government to take an active part in its organization, and to exact greater discipline, more expenditure of effort, and more risk-taking from them.*

Assimilation of Forces: Communist attention focussed on rural Viet Nam as the strategically decisive area. The Party leadership consequently structured its forces such that they were inextricably bound into the social fabric of rural communities by ties of family, friendship, and common interest. Four criteria implicit in communist doctrine may be used to judge the degree to which forces are assimilated:

1. the forces are of local origin, and are representative of the local ethnic, religious, family, class or productive groups;
2. the forces perform functions distinctly perceived as useful within the local community;
3. the incentives used to motivate the forces are regulated by the local community;
4. the forces are locally supplied in terms of pay, food, labor, intelligence, etc.

The logic of these criteria is dictated by the communist view that human action is determined by interest. To insure that a sympathetic environment exists into which forces may be assimilated, it is essential that the forces be representative of the people composing the environment, and serve their interests. Moreover the best way to insure that forces once recruited remain responsive to local interests is to structure their incentive, intelligence and logistic systems around the local community, such that responsiveness is a condition for survival: if the members of the forces are responsive to local interests, they survive and prosper; if they are not, they die.

Each of these four criteria was addressed by specific communist policies in Long An. For the first, for example, were the requirements as to local and class origin for vertical mobility in revolutionary organizations. For the second were the communist policies relating to land redistribution, progressive taxation, decentralization of political power, and protection from government repressive measures. The third criterion was served by various Party working principles which placed a high value on relations with the population in determining promotion; typical of these were such principles as criticism and self-criticism and "the higher-ups go down."

The fourth criterion was addressed by the requirement that each community supply its own forces.

On the other hand by these criteria government forces were poorly assimilated. Those rating highest were village and hamlet officials, local militia, etc., since these were all composed of local people. Yet each of these forces was involved to a greater or lesser degree in opposing the redistributive measures advocated by the Party, or in forcing the execution of measures such as the strategic hamlet program in opposition to local interests. The central government's conventional military forces, and its administration down to district level, did not even share this feature of being local in origin, since this was excluded by specific government policies. Moreover their incentive, intelligence and logistic structures were centrally oriented rather than being decentralized and focussed on rural communities. Thus while the government often spoke of the importance of the rural areas, in fact its forces were led by urban people, supplied from urban areas, and served urban interests.

Two interesting consequences derive from the differing requirements between the Party and the government as to assimilation of forces. First is that the Party's decentralized logistic and intelligence systems, based in each rural community, greatly reduced the need for security forces to defend lines of communication, depots, administrative centers, etc. On the other hand the government's centralized logistic and intelligence systems, based on ministries in Saigon, demanded the use of heavy security forces, further aggravating its already heavy need for troops. Thus a series of doctrinal failures—centralized intelligence and logistic systems, "protecting the population," and an exclusively tactical conception of security—led to the erroneous view that a numerical superiority of troops (for example the oft-quoted ratio of ten to one) was necessary to defeat the enemy. As the communist victory demonstrated, victory was possible with a numerical inferiority.

A second consequence of the communist decentralized logistic and intelligence systems was that it permitted the Party to do away with outposts: its "outposts" were simply the homes of each of its sympathizers. This in turn was permitted by the Party's social policies which insured that a sufficient portion of the population would shelter and supply the Party's forces to maintain the requisite level of combat. Thus the Party's agents living among and responding to rural people was every bit as necessary as government officials living in outposts and responding to Saigon. In each case the forces clung to and nurtured their lifeline.

Communalism: A third analytic perspective is that of *communalism*, which summarizes an extremely important difference in approach between the communist and the government efforts to gain the loyalty of the rural population. A central feature of the communist effort was its focus on developing forces assimilated into rural communities. The Party's efforts to develop these forces were communal in the sense that they took place

within the framework of the peasant's span of interests, largely limited to issues within his own community. The efforts were revolutionary in the sense that they effected a redistribution between social groups within the rural communities. The Party's approach thus was to develop bonds of loyalty between individuals and the local community leadership on the basis of the ability of the local leadership to resolve concrete local issues of importance in the peasant's life: land, taxation, protection from impressment into the national army, or a personally satisfying role in the activities of the community. That such communities would then behave in conformity with the demands of the national communist leadership was assured by the previously secured loyalty of the community leadership itself to the communist movement through the continuous vertical career structure from hamlet to Central Committee on which Party organization was founded. Thus "nationalism" as it is commonly understood was not a principal motive in the behavior of the rural population in ways demanded by the national communist leadership, although it was a constant legitimizing theme. Instead, local, or communal, issues were the motive factors.⁵ The genius of the Party lay in its ability to harness these local interests of the rural population to its national revolutionary goals. It accomplished this by strengthening community leadership, whose prior loyalty to the communist movement had been assured through the kinds of policies described above. Thus although previous pages have referred to the communist movement, and to communist forces, in fact most of the participants subjectively felt themselves fulfilling their own or their community's interests and not those of some remote communist leadership.

In contrast the government's approach in its quest for "control" of the rural population may be summarized in the word "nationalism": attempting to create direct bonds of loyalty between individuals and the central government. Contrary to the communist policy of developing local leadership, the government suppressed local leadership and allowed it no authority, maintaining "control" instead by centralizing power in the hands of officials appointed from Saigon to rule the countryside. "Nationalism" and its corollary, a diffuse anti-communism, instead of being legitimizing themes, were the substance of the government's appeal, in the name of which rural people were expected to make sacrifices in their personal interests: movement controls, free labor to build an agrovillage, abandonment of one's home and fields to move into a strategic hamlet or to establish a free-strike zone. While such interventions by the central government were often described as "revolutionary" or "modernizing," in fact they were not revolutionary

⁵Communist cadres emphasized that it was seldom sufficient in recruiting merely to mention the need to "liberate the country from the American imperialists." Such a statement would gain nods of approval, but action was conditional on explaining how the individual himself would be "liberated," e.g., by gaining land, by opportunities for education through the revolutionary movement, by gaining a position of power in the local community.

in the sense of effecting a redistribution of values between social groups, although they were disruptive. We can see by 1965 which approach proved viable in Long An: the communist "communal" approach built on the admittedly narrow span of interests of the rural population, or the government's "nationalist" approach, which attempted to supersede this narrow span of interests with direct bonds of loyalty to an abstract national community.⁶

CONCLUSION

We may summarize our conclusions by noting three elements in the collapse of the government presence in Long An:

1. The existence of strongly-felt distributive conflicts within Vietnamese society;
2. the weakly motivated and poorly assimilated nature of government forces;
3. the failure of the government leaders to understand the process that was taking place—indeed their lack even of the means of conceptualizing the process.

The distributive conflicts existing within Vietnamese society allowed the Party to motivate a small core of supporters to the point where they would risk death, in order to threaten and finally to destroy the government's weakly motivated local apparatus. The central government's inappropriate reactions to this threat, initiating a vicious circle of self-destructive responses, were a pivotal element in the communist strategy of victory. Had government leaders understood that the conflict was not a military one to overthrow a particular government, but instead a social conflict to overthrow a particular social system, then they might have seen that the existing system was not defensible at any level of mobilization, since those to be called upon to defend the system had little incentive to do so. In fact the leadership did not conceive of the problem in these terms and so fell into what we have called a reinforcement strategy, although government officials had no mental categories corresponding to reinforcement and preemptive strategies and were thus unaware of the risks and costs of choosing the former over the latter.

In contrast the Party's ability to develop a decisive superiority in the balance of forces within each rural community was founded on its superior

⁶It is ironical that what might be called the too-advanced state of conceptualization of government officials stood in the way of their strengthening communal loyalties, since this was dissonant with what is virtually a dogma of Western thought: that "nationalism" and "modernization" mean "more inclusive loyalties." Following this dogma they felt it their duty instead to *break down* communal loyalties—thus unwittingly undermining their own position. In contrast the revolutionary leadership had handled the identical problem by *strengthening* loyalties to communal leadership, and then binding the resulting great number of communities together with a national skeleton of a continuous vertical promotion system within the revolutionary organization.

conception of revolutionary war as a social process involving generation of forces through a series of policies offering contingent incentives. The Party opted for what we have called a strongly preemptive strategy, projecting a picture of a more just society which threatened an absolute minimum number of people and in which a significant number of people would experience a sharp upward movement. Once this had been done the government's attempts at escalation rebounded against the government itself.

In conclusion it is appropriate to say that in an intellectual sense the problems were far more complex than the simple issues of corruption, underdevelopment or of terror: they were a question of the form of social organization itself which the government maintained. What happened did not have to happen, except as a consequence of limited understanding by the principal government participants and their foreign advisors. In retrospect perhaps the most significant aspect of talking to government officials was their belief that the steps they took were inexorably demanded by the situation itself, with no alternatives possible. In fact there was a whole range of alternate strategies which were not apparent to them due to their limited understanding of the process that was taking place.

Yet paradoxically what had to be done was so simple to understand that even "dumb peasants" could grasp it—and win.