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**STUDY OF A
MEKONG DELTA PROVINCE
BY DAVID HUNT**

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Introduction

Among American opponents of the Vietnam war, there has been a tendency over the past decade to see the Vietnamese people in terms of misleading images. Until the Tet Offensive of 1968, and to some extent after that time, the predominant image was that of a long-suffering people being inexorably pounded into submission by an all-powerful American war machine. After Tet, a sharply different image partially replaced the first one. In the new view, the National Liberation Front consisted of resistance fighters of super-human proportions, enjoying the unwavering support of the people and all but impervious to the effects of American technological warfare.

Both of these images were powerful ones, and in their different ways they helped to give the anti-war protest a continuing impetus over the years. But they were very far from an adequate view of the war. As David Hunt's intensive study of the resistance in one Mekong Delta province

shows, the NLF cadres were neither passive victims of U.S. imperialism nor invincible heroes moving blithely from one victory to the next. They were people with human problems, and some of them defected from the NLF along the way — but they managed to adapt to American terror-bombing in a way that minimized physical and political damage and kept the prospect of ultimate victory very much alive.

Naturally the ideological response of American policymakers to the unexpectedly strong resistance they encountered in Vietnam was a racist one. That the Vietnamese persevered after years of mass killings by U.S. forces was explained by the extraordinarily hypocritical notion that "Asians value life cheaply." The anti-war movement has rightly seen and attacked the government's efforts to use this kind of racism as a means of making the war seem acceptable to the American people. At the same time, opponents of the war, who have had no stake in the preservation of stereotyped views of the Vietnamese, have often succumbed to them. Neither pity nor romanticization is a response that allows for a genuine sense of solidarity. It is in the belief that a close look at the Vietnamese resistance will provide a better basis for such solidarity that we are devoting this issue to David Hunt's article.

Our next issue will include several other articles — studies of the GI and anti-war movements, a critical essay on Frances Fitzgerald's *Fire In the Lake*, and a fuller editorial statement — that were originally planned for this issue but had to be postponed for reasons of space.

Villagers at War:

The National Liberation Front

In My Tho Province, 1965-1967

David Hunt

INTRODUCTION: A LOCAL STUDY OF THE NLF

Our knowledge of a generation of war in Vietnam is strikingly uneven. On the one hand, eye-witness accounts from veterans, books and newspaper reports, Watergate-related disclosures and the Pentagon Papers, have given us a picture of American involvement in Indochina all the way back to 1946. But at the same time, we still know very little about the other side, the Viet Minh and the National Liberation Front (NLF) of South Vietnam. This is an essay about the NLF in My Tho Province. It deals with the years 1965 to 1967 when the United States tried and failed through large-scale military action to crush the insurgents in the South.

By concentrating on this Mekong Delta Province, I hope

to show what U. S. escalation meant in a specific locale, and how Front cadres (1) resisted the ambitious American campaign to destroy the movement they had built. First, I define the village framework within which NLF and US-GVN (Government of Vietnam — Saigon) forces grappled for supremacy, as well as the mode of operation shaping the insurgents' response to U. S. intensification of the war. In the second section, I describe how after 1965 Americans and their Saigon allies made bombardment of rural areas the central feature of the counter-insurgency effort. The effects of this bombing and shelling are then analyzed. Finally, I consider why it was that cadres were able to cope with U. S. intervention.

NLF leaders have always stressed the interdependence of military and political activity within the guerrilla movement. Still, in practice these two facets of the insurgency are clearly distinguishable. There is a great deal of information available on NLF military units, on the strategy and tactics of guerrilla warfare, on problems of supply, fortification, recruitment and training of soldiers. At the same time, many of our informants are peasants who had served the Front in hamlets and villages, and their recollections provide us with a unique opportunity to observe the "civilian" side of the movement at this grassroots level. In the following pages, I am concerned with the work of local cadres who supported the war effort from their posts in the rural communities of My Tho. In other words, our subject is the political aspects of NLF resistance to U. S. intervention.

My analysis rests on material drawn from the RAND Corporation's "Viet Cong Motivation and Morale" project, conducted in Vietnam from 1964 to 1969. Designed under Pentagon sponsorship to explore strengths and weaknesses of the NLF, the project consisted of interviews with prisoners of war and with defectors from guerrilla ranks who sought refuge in the Chieu Hoi ("Open Arms") program of the Saigon Government. The interviews are organized by topic, one of which is: "Activities of the Viet Cong Within Dinh Tuong Province." Covering the period from 1965 to January 1968, the "DT" sequence of interviews is the only

series in the RAND project to focus on a single province. It is therefore well-suited to serve as the basis for a local study of the NLF. My discussion of events in My Tho depends almost entirely on evidence drawn from this series of interviews. (2)

Readers should keep in mind the specific nature of the RAND materials. Some 85% of the respondents (242 out of 285) in the "DT" sequence were defectors who had decided to leave the Front. Called "ralliers" by Saigon authorities, these witnesses offer us a necessarily biased view, rather than a random sample of opinion, on the NLF. All respondents were interviewed by Vietnamese employees of the RAND Corporation, and records of these discussions were translated and transcribed by other Vietnamese working for the Americans. In a number of ways, these staff members introduced their own anti-NLF prejudice into the data-gathering process. In a broader sense, the very organization of the project was slanted. RAND went to Vietnam because U. S. leaders knew very little about an enemy they were determined to wipe out. Rather than carrying on an independent scholarly study, its consultants and interviewers had a para-military function: they were financed by one of the belligerents in a bloody war to gather intelligence about the other. The distorting effect of these various factors must be kept in mind as we review what the RAND materials have to tell us about the NLF. Readers interested in further discussion of the transcripts as historical sources should consult the accompanying essay, "RAND and the NLF."

VILLAGE POLITICS

Villagers interviewed by RAND see the Vietnam war first of all in terms of its effects on their own local communities, and we must proceed from this same starting point if we hope to understand what the transcripts have to tell us. The primary residential unit in the countryside is the "settlement," a cluster of ten to twenty families. Settlements are grouped together to form a hamlet, and a number of hamlets — from four to ten or more — constitute a village. The interview materials make villages seem like big

places, with their populations of as many as ten thousand people and their several hamlets and dozens of settlements scattered far afield. A number of interviewees stated that they were unable to identify the other hamlets in the village, aside from the one in which they lived, and even neighboring settlements seemed far away to some respondents. One peasant reported that he and his neighbors seldom saw village leaders, "because nobody wanted to go such a long distance to the Village Committee Headquarters." (3) The NLF organizes groups of villages together to form districts, six of which make up the Province of My Tho. In the interview accounts, little importance is attached to district boundaries; they are regarded simply as lines on the map, impersonal administrative divisions which do not seem to have much relation to the daily routines of the villagers. When we discuss districts, we have already moved beyond the sphere of "local" politics, as understood by most peasants.

But in looking at maps of My Tho, we are surprised to discover how small these places really are. The average village of Cai Be District is less than ten square miles in area. The District is twelve miles across on the east-west axis, fifteen to twenty miles from north to south. Its approximately 138,000 inhabitants live in an area of about 200 square miles. Respondents often speak of liberated and GVN-controlled zones as if they were separate states, and defectors will say that they are "out here" in a Chieu Hoi Center, while their former homes are "in there" where the NLF still governs. And yet "out here" and "in there" may be separated by only an hour's walk. According to a respondent, the Front's position in Cai Lay District was most favorable in Thanh Hoa Village, which turns out to be the one community in the area closest to the District Town, a GVN center of operations. Along the same lines, the Front strongholds of Nhi Binh, Long Dinh and Tam Hiep Villages in Chau Thanh District are only five to ten miles from the Province Capital City of My Tho, and My Tho is one of the most important of Saigon's power centers in the whole Mekong Delta region.

The interview respondents take these distances so seriously because they live in a milieu where roads are poor,

mechanical means of transport rare, mass media and literacy only moderately developed. Almost all communication must be done in person, and except for motorized sampans, travel is by foot. A district headquarters ten miles away therefore is very far away. For the peasant who has grown up in this kind of world and absorbed its particular consciousness of space, attachment to a native place will naturally be strong. Not surprisingly, hamlet and village seem to be the arenas in which interview respondents feel at home and where they are able to function most effectively.

Building a resistance movement in the countryside had to be done within these self-absorbed communities. The people "only believed their own eyes and ears," noted a respondent.

They believed what the other people of the village said. There is a great difference in the level of understanding of the villagers. Some could make sound judgments while others couldn't. The majority of them were laborers with a low level of understanding, and only a few had a relatively good education. It is easy to read a newspaper, but it is difficult to understand what the articles say. It always takes me a few hours to read a newspaper, because after reading an article I spend a lot of time pondering what has been said.

Outsiders would have a hard time winning the confidence of cautious peasants. "Only natives of the village could understand everything that was going on in the area," observed a respondent, "and they were the only ones who were trusted by the people." Taking into consideration this fierce peasant localism, we can appreciate the importance of the hamlet cadres within the NLF. These activists called meetings, collected taxes, conducted recruitment drives, and supervised the police apparatus in the community. If the Front gained sufficient local strength, popular associations for farmers, women and the youth would be organized, with hamlet cadres serving as leaders. According to the testimony of many respondents, these officials were almost always natives of the hamlets in which they worked.

The duties of village cadres were more complex. Each of the hamlet Women's Associations was responsible to a single Women's Association Executive Committee at village level, and the hamlet officials were closely supervised by the members of this Committee. Similar Executive Committees presided over the hamlet branches of the Farmer's and Liberation Youth's Associations. The Front's village organization also included a variety of specialized branches or sections, for propaganda, finance, military support services, security, and so on. Like their colleagues in the Executive Committees of the popular associations, the members of these sections watched over the implementation of policy at hamlet level. Finally the Village Committee, headed by the Village Secretary, was responsible for coordinating the whole local operation.

District officials exercised jurisdiction over relatively large areas which included anywhere from fifteen to thirty villages and in some cases more than one hundred thousand people. Cadres assigned to this level travelled frequently within their areas and received regular reports from below on the people's "state of mind." But in general they worked at one remove from local affairs. The district office was the lowest echelon with its own clerical staff of clerks and typists. Its cadres attempted to compare the activities of village officials, so that strong and weak points could be brought to the attention of local committees. For the benefit of village and hamlet personnel, the district also defined policy, organized study sessions to deal with specific problems, and provided training for service in specialized branches. In frequent contact with province officials, district cadres were strategically placed mediators whose activity assured that national programs would be understood and carried out at the local level.

District representatives tried not to linger in any one village. Concerned with general policy, their principal mission was to promote local initiative within the guidelines sent down from above. As one respondent explained,

The directives from the district never stated in detail the method which the village had to follow to carry out some tasks. The directives only stressed

the importance of the tasks, and demanded that they be carried out effectively. The village cadres had to hold meetings to discuss the ways and means to carry out the tasks to satisfy the demands of the district. In special cases, when the district had to furnish more details, it usually sent a cadre down to confer with the village cadres and helped them to carry out the task instead of stating all the details in the directives.

But while district cadres appeared in villages only on special occasions, village cadres were constantly operating in hamlets under their jurisdiction, supporting and directing hamlet officials. These village leaders were vital in the overall design of the Front, because they were the highest ranking cadres to be in daily relations with the people. Maintaining NLF strength at this echelon was always a priority. If necessary an entire hamlet administration would be stripped of personnel to fill suddenly vacated slots at village level, and from the other direction district cadres were sent down to villages in trouble when it appeared that officials on the scene were not equal to their assignments.

Administrative charts never tell us much about the functioning of an organization like the NLF. The content of its programs, and not the complexity of its bureaucratic structure, determined what results the Front would achieve. Still, from the purely bureaucratic point of view, NLF local organization is interesting because it was the focal point for such a variety of conflicting pressures. On the one hand, guerrilla war depended absolutely on the effectiveness of hamlet, village and district cadres, who collected the taxes and recruited the troops needed for the war. To perform these tasks, cadres had to be able to operate within the village context, to speak convincingly about the needs of the peasants and to sponsor programs which dealt successfully with the basic problems in their lives. But on the other hand, local cadres also had to awaken in the villagers a sense of the national and even the international dimensions of the struggle. The revolution could not advance at a uniform pace throughout South Vietnam; a thousand autonomous village guerrilla movements would not add up to a

successful national effort. There were times when the revolutionaries needed to concentrate their efforts in a few strategic areas, while marking time in other regions. Liberated villages had to remain in a state of mobilization in order to help other, still contested areas. When after 1965 many villages were being severely mauled by American military assaults, the Front had to persuade villagers that the sacrifices they were making were balanced by gains in other regions, and that the NLF's position in global terms was improving, even while it suffered serious losses in many locales.

Peasants long accustomed to believing only "their own eyes and ears" were often reluctant to follow this kind of reasoning. In a May 1967 reorientation session, one cadre objected when a district representative presented a favorable survey of war developments. "You said that we defeated the enemy in the dry season," he argued; "why were we defeated by the enemy in (my village)?" The instructor replied that "the battles we won were big and the battles in which we were defeated were small ones; therefore we had to look for and understand so that we could distinguish the common affairs from the important ones." But the questioner remained unconvinced. With his "own eyes," he had witnessed a local battle in which ten guerrillas and five civilians had been killed. Besides, his village had been attacked "again and again" by aircraft, many villagers had been killed, and living conditions were bad. "Maybe the Front was winning the war in some other places," he concluded, "but not in my village."

Even events very close to home could be misconstrued. The battle at Ap Bac in January 1963 was one of the NLF's most dramatic and widely reported victories. Several American correspondents were caught in the crossfire, and their dispatches carried descriptions of the event over thousands of miles to readers in the United States. Ap Bac is a hamlet in Nhi Binh Village, in the middle of My Tho, not more than a few miles from even the most remote corner of the Province. But one defector nonetheless affirmed that the famous Front victory had really been a disastrous defeat, in which the NLF suffered 120 casualties. His "wife's sister," a native of Nhi Binh, had told him so. (4)

Confronted with this village provincialism, cadres always endeavored to place their own activities in a broader context. One defector recalled that, "As a rule, before introducing the new policy to (the people), the village secretary always spoke of the international and home political situation so as to make the villagers become more enthusiastic about paying taxes to help the Front to feed the soldiers and to buy armaments." In these briefings, as they are paraphrased by respondents, Front cadres described military developments in the various parts of South Vietnam and in the other countries of Indochina. They reviewed the troubled state of relations between the United States and its European allies, as well as the situation in satellite countries like South Korea, Thailand, and the Philippines. Much stress was placed on the U.S. anti-war movement and on the support of other Third World countries, especially those whose recent history provided encouraging precedent for the Vietnamese resistance. Here is a typical briefing from the 1967 period.

... Despite their seemingly overwhelming strength, the Americans remain weak in many respects. One of their main weaknesses lies in the ever growing international movement for self-determination in many countries. Taking Cuba and Korea as examples, the instructor showed us that the Americans had failed to vanquish these countries. He stressed the American failure in Cuba, stating that despite their forces, the Americans had been forced to respect the Cuba people's self-determination even though Cuba is quite near American territory. The instructor also stressed the "Antiwar Movement" which is now spreading throughout the United States. We were told that all the American students tore up their draft cards to manifest their resentment toward the U.S. Government and refused to fight in Vietnam.

Building NLF strength at the "grassroots" level was not and could not be done without struggling against peasant localism. Repeated discussion of events outside the village

was designed to ease the strain on a local organization which was asked to win the trust of wary villagers suspicious of outsiders, and at the same time to carry out directives received from far away.



"Liaison Post"

Village relations with the outside world were also important because the NLF had to recruit substantial numbers of peasants to serve in the district, province, region and national offices of the Front, and to persuade thousands of others to join Main and Local Force units where they would fight far from their own settlements. One of the strengths of the NLF organization was that poor peasants could easily rise through its ranks. In the rigid, semi-feudal society of the countryside, this meritocratic practice had a liberating impact, and many a villager soon outgrew feelings of homesickness when presented with the opportunity to develop skills and potentials in a milieu which seemed more open and exciting than the typical hamlet or village. "I liked to move around," affirmed a defector. "I knew I might get killed if I kept fooling around with weapons. But each day I remained alive meant that my knowledge was furthered by what I saw on that day." Keeping open channels of advancement was a vital necessity not only because large numbers of people had to be found to perform essential tasks in the

higher echelons, but also because hope for promotion was a significant factor in maintaining the morale of local cadres. "I wasn't struggling and making sacrifices to stay forever in the village," stated an ambitious defector, from a village where these channels were temporarily blocked:

If this practice was maintained, all the efforts, labor, and sacrifices of the village cadres would come to nothing and wouldn't lead them anywhere. What would be the point of continuing the struggle then? Most of the village cadres were disappointed and discouraged, and neglected their work. They used to say during party meetings: "No matter how zealous we are in our tasks, when we die there will only be a few joss sticks on our tombs, and the commemorative ceremony will last for a few minutes."

For this cadre and others like him, service in the Front was valued precisely because it provided access to the world outside the narrow boundaries of the village. (5)

At the same time, there were peasants who found it difficult to leave behind the reassuringly familiar contours of the native hamlet. We glibly speak of village personnel as "local" officials, but from the perspective of an inexperienced hamlet cadre, the village, with its thousands of inhabitants, its religious and ethnic minorities, its economic and political ties with neighboring communities, presented an intimidating challenge. Stepping up to district level involved an even more drastic adjustment. Here, for example, are the reflections of one modest defector:

(The cadre) promised me that if I tried to do my best to carry out Front work, I would receive the honor to lead and to serve the people according to my capacity. Because of this encouragement I worked very hard. After I came back from the training course for cadres of the Youth Group Chapter, I worked even harder than before. But when I was called up to the district, I lost all my

enthusiasm. I only wanted to work in my hamlet or village, near my family, and I never wanted to go away. I had a wife, a child, and my parents to take care of. I thought it was about right for me to work in the Youth Group Chapter of the village, because it suited my capacity and I could stay near my family. However, if I had to serve in a higher position, it would be beyond my capacity, I did not even have the capacity to serve as a Party cell leader and I had to go away from my family.

NLF local organization had to perform a complex task in this area as well as in others. For every "buffalo" trying to "wear down his horns," there were others who quickly arrived at a level which seemed "about right," and who were very reluctant to go any further from home. Relying on mass participation, the Front had to push people out of their accustomed slots in society, but without completely uprooting them. It had to satisfy both the peasants who liked to "move around," and those who "never wanted to go away" from their native hamlet.

NLF success in dealing with these and other problems and in building a local base is massively documented by the interview transcripts. At first glance, it appears that NLF and GVN forces are fighting more or less on equal terms all over the countryside, but as we read on, we begin to see that the two antagonists in fact have very different kinds of relations with the villages of My Tho. It would be misleading to say that one side is more effective in the villages than the other. The Front has a local organization, from district down to hamlet, and the GVN does not.

Take, for example, the observation of one respondent who noted that, "The Front's maps are made by the Front, and are not like the maps out here (in the GVN area). They show every creek, trail and path going through the orchards." Another villager commented:

The maps (the Front) used are printed with colours somewhat like the maps used by the ARVN. But they bear no foreign words. Everything was

written in Vietnamese. The place names were also those used by the people, and it was easier to spot the various locations on them.

Although both sides are grappling for supremacy in the countryside, the maps tell us that the Front operates from within the rural community. Its cartographers know the names of "every creek, trail and path going through the orchards," and they employ the terminology "used by the people" themselves. By contrast, GVN officials chart these battlefields from the vantage point of outsiders, who do not even call features of the landscape by their proper names. They come to the fight as aliens, their maps covered with "foreign words".

This contrast is also apparent in interview discussions of "control" of the countryside. According to one respondent, the goal of the Front is "tight control over the village from all points of view — economic, political, social and military." He explained that, "A village is said to be completely liberated when the GVN troops are no longer able to set foot there, when there are no shellings or bombings, and when the Front has complete control over the people." The terminology offers no problems: the NLF "controls" a village when it has achieved complete hegemony and when GVN influence in all its forms has been rigorously excluded.

By contrast, here is the situation in a village described as "controlled" by the GVN:

(GVN officials) only came into the hamlets when it was convenient for them to do so, for example when the Armed Propaganda Team or the GVN troops entered the hamlets. Rural Reconstruction cadres also came into the GVN-controlled hamlets, but they only did it during the day — at night they went back to the market place. As for the VC cadres, they also went into the GVN-controlled hamlets to operate, but before they came in they had to check the situation. If the cadres who operated openly told them that the situation was favor-

able, then armed VC took up positions at the roads leading to the hamlet, and the cadres entered the hamlet to operate. They only stayed a short time there, however, about 20 minutes. Usually, they collected taxes, or indoctrinated the people, or recruited new cadres when they were in these hamlets.

In this village, Saigon's putative "control" has little political significance. Even here, in one of its strong areas, the GVN does not maintain a permanent political base, as does the NLF. GVN cadres "only came into the hamlets when it was convenient for them to do so," while Front cadres "who operated openly" — that is, who possess legal papers, whose NLF affiliation is secret — seem to live within the community. The situation in the village is relatively favorable to the Saigon regime in that the local Front organization cannot function above ground during the day, and Saigon "Armed Propaganda Teams" (the idea for such teams, including the name itself, is borrowed directly from the NLF) and regular troops can move around without fear of being hit hard by guerrillas or other NLF units. But by no means does this position entail "tight control over the village from all points of view."

Beyond notions of "controlled" or of "contested" areas, the Saigon authorities have no vocabulary to describe the political situation at village level. By contrast, Front cadres speak of "strong" and "weak" villages. A "strong" area is one where the local Front organizations are flourishing and where people support the NLF. A village may be "strong" in this political sense, while it is "contested" from the military point of view. On the other hand, villages where GVN military intervention is no longer a threat (which are, in one sense, "liberated") may be "weak" because the NLF still has not mobilized a lot of popular support. The GVN has no corresponding set of categories. In these terms, all the areas it controls are "weak."

The asymmetry of the two points of view is evident if we examine the situation in "contested" villages. To a varying degree, the Front maintains schools, collects taxes, drafts

the youth, and organizes labor teams in contested areas; see the above passage for signs of such political activity even in so-called GVN zones. If possible, land reform measures may be put into effect, with the decision on this kind of issue often depending more on internal political considerations than on the threat of GVN intervention. As one cadre reported, "We kept the present (land) status unchanged, because my hamlet is still a contested area. Furthermore, the land distribution policy has not yet permeated the villagers' minds." In fact, as one respondent indicated, the best cadres were often sent into contested areas because,

it has been realized that if the cadres who are assigned to the contested areas are demoralized, passive, afraid of hardships and death, and are always obsessed with defeatism, they will never carry out their duties enthusiastically in order to elevate the movement in those hamlets.

Even in villages regarded by the GVN as completely "pacified," NLF cadres with "a high struggling spirit" remained behind, to carry on with campaigns of sabotage and political assassination and to maintain contact with local sympathizers. In other words, for the Front political struggle goes on everywhere, regardless of who has the upper hand militarily.

The Saigon regime functions according to exactly the opposite principle. For the GVN, a village often begins to be classified as contested only after its local cadres have been forced out. "The (Saigon) hamlet chief has fled," said one respondent of his village, "and since then there have been no GVN officials in my hamlet which thereby became contested." In the interview accounts, the reader does not find GVN tax collectors and military recruiters maintaining permanent offices in the villages. Officials barricaded themselves up in nearby military outposts or even in the district capital and waited for the peasants to come to them with tax payments, while the army "drafted" youths during sweeps. As a result, the best way to describe a contested

village would be to say that it is an area in which the Front attempts to put its program into effect from the inside, while the GVN endeavors to disrupt such activities from the outside, by bombing, shelling and periodic ARVN sweeps.

In other words, NLF influence in its various forms blankets the countryside of My Tho, while GVN influence is spotted here and there in strips and pockets. The fundamentally political power of the Front is fluid and omnipresent. It exists wherever cadres can gather a few peasants together for political discussion. The fundamentally military power of the GVN is, by contrast, relatively unwieldy and inert. It exists only where cumbersome GVN armed units can make their presence felt. Saigon strength is centered in the capital city and district towns, and also in a handful of pacified villages where large contingents of troops are permanently stationed. It also is a factor around the military posts dotting the rural areas and along road and water ways on which GVN military units can move swiftly, but which are denied to the NLF because in these open spaces its fighters and cadres would be vulnerable to sudden attack.

Hemmed in though it may be, the GVN presence is still widely felt. Because the area being fought over is so small, with roads and especially canals reaching into every corner of the Province, the Front must live "integrated with the enemy." (6) We exaggerate, but perhaps in an illuminating way, if we imagine a situation in which NLF cadres would seldom be outside hearing range, or out of sight of the nearest GVN authorities. Operating within this crowded scene, cadres had to attend to the smallest details. For example, the Front threatened to "kill right away anyone who did not comply with their orders and let their dogs bark." Why? "The dogs would bark when Front members on mission approached and this would give away their presence to the GVN which would shell them." Shelling might also occur if a cadre moved around too freely in daylight and was spotted by a GVN artillery unit looking over from a neighboring hamlet.

Given the fact that the two sides were always virtually within shouting distance of one another, and that by 1967 the

Front did not, in its own terms, fully control any areas in My Tho (since the GVN was shelling villages from one end of the Province to the other), it is remarkable how isolated the Saigon authorities continued to be. When it came to political struggle, these officials might as well have been a thousand miles away. As one peasant observed, "I have only been indoctrinated by the NLF. Nobody from the GVN ever gave me any indoctrination." A defector from a contested village observed that the "Front's people are always there, they only leave the village when the ARVN comes." Another respondent commented :

The people are still following the VC because they have been doing so for a long time. The voice of the government has never really reached them, while the cadres of the Front are always there to speak to them, to inform them of everything they want them to know.

The "voice" of the GVN was not heard because its officials did not live with the peasants, not even in many villages "controlled" by Saigon armed forces.

Here is another summary — which also shows the tactful but unmistakable way some defectors attempted to inform anti-NLF interviewers of realities which the latter did not want to acknowledge :

In my opinion, the people living in the liberated area do not understand very much. They have been only propagandized by the Front and they have not been affected by GVN propaganda. They are people who trust only what they see, and when GVN soldiers come through their hamlets, they only saw death and sadness around them. They have witnessed the civil guards seize their chickens and their belongings and therefore they thought that the GVN has been on the wrong path. The peasants only trust those who remain close to them, talk with them frequently, and help them in their everyday life. In short, whichever side is able to take care

of their security and to help them, would win their support whether it is the Front or the GVN.

According to one respondent, NLF cadres carried no identification papers. When there was a question about someone's identity, people had only to ask around the neighborhood: "If you are a cadre, someone will know you." Front personnel moved about so easily because they were right at home in the village. As a POW recalled:

In an emergency cadres could contact the (Village) Secretary at any time, because it was a small area and the people knew the cadres and could tell the cadres where the Secretary was. All the cadres had to do was to ask the people if they had seen the secretary and pretty soon they could track him down. Since the people knew all the cadres, they only told them where the secretary was, if someone they knew wasn't a cadre asked them, they wouldn't tell him.

In this, and in so many other respects, the transcripts hammer home a basic point: Front cadres belonged to the villages in which they worked, and NLF local organization was an integral part of the social order of the countryside.

THE MECHANICS OF A PROTRACTED WAR

The NLF was strong in the villages of My Tho because a great many peasants firmly believed in the political program it espoused. The Front stopped the excesses of GVN officials and soldiers, it involved people in the government of their communities, it built schools and developed modern medical programs. Most of all, through land reform, the NLF promoted economic equality among the villagers. Cadres seized the holdings of absentee owners and put heavy pressure on rich peasants to get them to relinquish control over some of their fields. These lands were redistributed to poor peasants, while at the same time rents were forced down and minimum wages were established for

agricultural laborers. Even observers hostile to the Front have recognized the positive impact of these programs. For example, after conducting an extensive survey in two villages of My Tho Province, former National Security Council staff member Robert Sansom concluded that land reform measures

were for the vast majority, very effective. It is difficult to overestimate the extent of these reforms.... From all the benefits it brought to the peasantry, it can probably be said that the impetus behind the Viet Cong land reform was not in the general case terror but the sanction of implied force supported by the general will. (7)

Land reform, and other changes consistent with the "general will" of the villagers, won support for the NLF and led to the exclusion of GVN influence from the countryside, thus forcing American leaders to escalate the war in 1965.

Once the war did escalate, programs of social reform had to be temporarily postponed. Indeed, some of the gains already made were wiped out as the conflict intensified; for example, recently built schools and medical stations were levelled by US-GVN bombing and shelling. The energies of the people, which once had enabled the NLF to fight and to carry on a revolution at the same time, were now channeled exclusively into the military effort. In this sense, 1965 was an important turning point in the history of the Front, separating an era of successful social reconstruction from the desperate struggle for survival occasioned by U.S. intervention. But in another respect, strong lines of continuity are apparent, since the mode of operations adopted by the revolutionaries in the early sixties very much determined how they decided to meet subsequent tests. The methods and precepts guiding cadres as they responded to increased American military pressure had been a long time in the making. In order to understand the survival of the insurgency, we should consider for a moment the nature of this deeply ingrained political practice.

The logical place to begin is with the People's Revolu-

tionary, or Communist, Party of South Vietnam, which the respondents invariably refer to more simply as "the Party." Not every active participant in the Front was a Party member. Villagers were considered for inclusion only after serving an apprenticeship in the specialized branches or in one of the three popular associations at hamlet or village level. According to the reports of many interviewees, the most dedicated revolutionaries alone could hope to qualify. As a POW put it,

When one becomes a Communist Party member one ceases to think of one's own interests — even of one's life — and one is always ready to sacrifice oneself for the Party. Those who aren't Party members are still attached to their families and to their own interests, and so they can only serve the movement to a certain extent. I wanted very much to join the Party.

Within a resistance movement which was meant to include all the villagers, the Party was thus organized to form a hard core.

Candidates for membership in the Party were frankly told what was in store for them. One respondent, a POW, remembers how he was approached by Party cadres.

I wasn't told anything about my rights, or about the benefits or the power I would enjoy as a Party member. I was told that a Party member always had to sacrifice for his own class, and that he always had to set the good example for others — he had to be the first one to do everything, and that benefits would come to him only much later.

Another respondent recalled how he had always looked forward to joining the Party. "A Party member learned about everything ahead of others; he enjoyed material advantages (food, clothing, exemption from menial work), he could always have important missions, or a key job or a position of leadership." To his dismay, this candidate discovered that, once admitted, his life was very hard.

1. I had completely lost my liberty. Day and night, 24 hours out of 24, I was at the complete mercy of the Party. Whether it rained or blew, I had to respond instantly to any demand; not a minute of delay was possible.

2. My family became poorer and poorer, because I had no time any longer to work as a tailor as before when I was just a simple Front cadre; and

3. I was constantly subjected to severe criticism in Party meetings. Their austerity differed totally from the flexible and gentle manner they displayed before I was a Party member.

At the same time, this informant, who so precisely lists the drawbacks of Party membership, had tried unsuccessfully for a long time to gain admittance. Dreaming of "material advantages" and "important missions," he was repeatedly rebuffed by cadres who told him that he was too wrapped up in private pursuits, too attached to his job and family, to endure the sacrifices of life as a Communist.

The Party was especially careful to explain its position concerning domestic ties. Members were not asked to renounce family loyalty, but they were required to put other obligations first. As a female cadre explained to potential recruits reluctant to leave home, "Only the Front's success could help my family and theirs to overcome misery and starvation in the future." Another confronted a youth, who felt he was honor bound to care for his parents, in the following way :

Comrade, your words show that you are a son filled with filial piety, but in the face of the loss and destruction of the country, you have to choose between filial duty and duty towards your country. In this war, the people and your family too have to suffer. We all know that as a man you have to do your duty towards your parents as well as towards your country. How could you do both ? If you fulfill

your duty towards your family then you'd fail to complete your duty towards your country, and vice-versa. But, if you fulfill your duty towards your country, then by the same token you will have completed your duty towards your family, because if the South is liberated then your family will no longer be miserable and exploited.

A third cadre who had set aside family obligations affirmed that "he had only one family, but there are hundreds of families in the Nation." The decision was not an easy one to make, but Party cadres argued that people had to choose an exceptional set of priorities if they hoped to serve the revolution.

This line of reasoning was widely understood among the villagers. "I think that the majority of (the local officials) are worthy cadres," observed one respondent. "Only a few of them are bad since they are still strongly attached to their family relationships. Consequently they have sometimes neglected their duties." Another conceded that "I have not joined the Communist Party because I did not carry out my duties actively. I don't want to join it because I still love my family." In this spirit, many defectors testified that they finally abandoned the Front because they could not stand to see the fortunes of their family decline while they were absorbed in political activities.

Once recruited, Party members were introduced to the intricate mode of operation within the guerrilla movement. NLF success depended on the ability of its militants to apply the Front's "line and policy," which was formulated on a national level, in their own villages and hamlets. The process began with meetings involving representatives of all the villages in a particular district. Cadres from district and province level opened these sessions by laying down general guidelines concerning a selected topic. These policies were usually very complex. For example, Front revenues came for the most part from an income tax, and cadres had to master an elaborate set of tables linking assessments to the income of individual villagers, while supplementary documents explained a complicated variety of contingencies: what kind of exemptions were permitted,

when villagers in distress could appeal for a reduction in payments, what to do with incomes coming from commerce and other non-agricultural pursuits, and so on.

Participants were expected to master the policies being presented so that they could successfully implement them on the local level. Since the whole process of guerrilla war depended on the results of such meetings, the atmosphere was serious and intense, with daily sessions lasting "about six or seven hours." Cadres usually took notes, and those who did not know how to read and write quickly found themselves at a loss. "I was invited to be a Party member," confessed one respondent, "but I did not accept, arguing that I was illiterate The cadres urged me to learn to read and to write but I did not do it." The pressure was too much for some participants. A disgruntled respondent reacted in this way :

I got irritated because they pushed me too hard. They said that when we got back to our villages we had to do this and do that. My intellectual capability was not that high, it was tiring to my mind but they kept on jamming things into my head.

Only those who adjusted to the almost classroom-like atmosphere of these meetings would be able to work inside the Party.

Local cadres had not been assembled just to learn a few slogans and formulas. Since it was generally understood that a cadre who left the meeting with reservations would not be effective later on, all participants were expected to voice questions and criticisms, so that province and district cadres might hear about problems and have the opportunity to review the arguments in favor of the policy under consideration. Debate continued until all uncertainties had been cleared up to everyone's satisfaction. "Did you carry out long discussions in these courses?" one interviewer asked his subject, a POW. "Of course," was the reply; "I had to let the trainees discuss till they understood the policy. The discussion only ended when the policy had permeated the trainees' minds."

Village cadres were also expected to describe conditions

in their home areas, with stress on the failures and weaknesses of the local organization. Those who presented such reports had to be prepared for the worst. If many village Party Chapters fell short of target goals, the district might decide to lower its expectations. But usually such reports were answered with stinging rebukes. One respondent, a defector, gave this example of the kind of criticisms he had heard at such sessions :

Our countrymen are suffering from the cruelty of the Americans and the GVN but what have we done to relieve the people from such calamities ? We claimed we are fighters for the liberation movement but what are we doing ? We have dodged our duties, we have left the people to their sufferings. We receive everything we need from the people, the rice we eat, the clothes we wear also come from the people. We rely on them to live and we dodged the fighting when they were killed by Diem and the Americans. It's a shameful thing, and unless we change, we don't deserve their support and their sympathy.

No wonder many local cadres were less than candid in describing problems in their villages : "In times of trouble, they concealed their errors so as to avoid blame and to be left in peace."

Party discipline was designed to prevent such evasiveness. Members were trained not only to make accurate observations, but also to be completely honest in their disclosures. A cadre with a "sense of responsibility" never hid mistakes because everyone in the movement would be endangered by persistent individual errors. "We told the assembly the entire truth," remembered a respondent, "because this is the rule. Nothing should be concealed among the (District) Committee members." Indeed, the ability to take criticism and to put it to good use was the most important quality distinguishing Communists from other people. Non-Party members were never allowed to attend Party meetings because,

If the course is only attended by Party members, the instructor can use violent criticisms which are considered very helpful in eradicating the trainees' shortcomings. But in the presence of Association members, violent criticisms cannot be used. The Association members haven't been trained to endure them, and, consequently the Party members' weak points wouldn't be corrected.



Assembly of NLF Cadre

Some cadres grasped the significance of criticism and self-criticism. As one respondent explained, "When you were wrong and you were courageous enough to admit that you had been wrong, that was a heroic action. And it was good because after acknowledging your errors, you were determined to correct yourself." But others could never get accustomed to this aspect of Front operations. One POW offered the opinion that most defectors "were either involved in some crimes with the Front or were unable to endure

the weight of criticism from their colleagues.”

The success of Communist organization was not a matter of creating paragons who never showed human weakness. The interview transcripts present us with cases of cadres who stole tax money and cheated on land reform, who were drunken and licentious, who neglected their duties and ran from the enemy. What the Party managed to do was to look for mistakes and, more important, to involve cadres in the process of correcting their own shortcomings. In effect, the whole point of Party membership was that people voluntarily accepted a situation in which their superiors regularly demanded almost superhuman achievement from them. If they thought these demands unfair, they were free to refuse Party membership. If they changed their minds once admitted, they could always resign: there are many references in the transcripts to people who quit the Front and retired to private life. But if they stayed, they had to work toward goals which seemed impossible, to be open about their inevitable failures, and to strive constantly to develop their own skills. This regime, which constantly drew out the talents and energies of its cadres, contributed substantially to the vitality of the NLF.

The point of district meetings was not simply to burden local cadres with a list of tasks to be accomplished, or to browbeat them with criticism. More fundamentally, district and province representatives aimed to persuade village officials that current policy made sense and would bring the desired results. The meetings served to heighten enthusiasm as much as to convey information. “The cadres’ speeches... stirred up the fighters and cadres’ morale,” recalled the respondent whose description of the criticism session was cited above. “As a rule after the reorientation courses, the trainees’ morale is much improved.”

Morale building was vital because the village representatives would in turn have to inspire or, as the respondents put it, to “motivate” the peasants back in their own villages. Arriving home from the district meeting, local cadres did not simply send out a few memos to get the tax campaign or the recruitment drive under way. First, they assembled all the other Party members in the village and carefully went over the materials they had brought back from the

district. The representatives were expected to answer criticisms, clear up misunderstandings, and most of all to convey a sense of confidence about the proposals under discussion. And in turn, village Party members had to listen attentively, take notes, ask questions, explore their own reactions and bring up any possible problems. The meeting would go on until all were satisfied with their understanding of the new "line and policy," and were ready to present it convincingly to others.

During the next phase, Party members sought out the "backbone elements," those villagers who were most active in the various popular associations, and introduced them to the Front's latest plans. In such meetings, the former students became teachers. Local Party members described the policy they had just studied, while the backbone elements were asked to make criticisms, to raise objections, to take responsibility for examining the directives until they too gained confidence in their basic soundness. If the village Party leaders had not been fully convinced by the first courses, if they did not feel strongly in favor of the new line and policy, they would never be able to mobilize the backbone elements, to answer their objections, and to convince them that the Front still deserved their trust.

These meetings of Party members and backbone elements were not concerned solely with problems of "motivation." Local cadres had received nothing more than a vague set of guidelines from the district. These general recommendations had to be refined to fit the circumstances of the village. It was at this point that the local background of the cadres came into play, since in practice it turned out that no two hamlets, indeed no two peasant households were exactly alike, and the policy suggested for a "typical" village never quite seemed to fit actual circumstances. Only cadres who knew intimately the community they were dealing with, and who were exceptionally resourceful in figuring out how to get things done would be able to take the abstract directives of their superiors and apply them successfully within a village full of real human beings.

When cadres and backbone elements were content with the results of their discussions, the rest of the villagers

assembled to go over the new policy. It would be wrong to imagine Party members lecturing or, as the RAND translators put it, indoctrinating, a silent and passive audience. The term used in this context by the NLF means to teach, to instruct, to enlighten. What RAND calls an indoctrination session would be more accurately rendered as a study session. (8) From the transcripts, we can see that what many respondents describe is not "indoctrination" at all. As with Party meetings, peasant assemblies were intended to promote real discussion in the course of which villagers grasped the logic of the directives under examination and gained confidence in their fundamental soundness. The Front would prosper only if large numbers were persuaded to enter enthusiastically into its campaigns. Mass mobilization, and not mere obedience, was what the cadres aimed to stimulate.

The development of this kind of thinking about politics took time. One respondent recalled that genuine popular support for the NLF emerged some time after the cadres began to operate openly. This support was evident from the fact that villagers "became more eager to participate in the discussion of the situation during the village meetings." Many respondents testified to the vitality of the "indoctrination" process. "In order to obtain good results," explained one respondent, "a policy must be thoroughly understood by the population through study sessions directed by the cadres, otherwise, the implementation of the policy cannot lead to good results." The Front "incessantly held many study sessions . . .," remembered another observer; "people of middle and poor farming classes positively carried out their duties and joined study sessions day and night." A third witness noted that, "During previous years, the hamlet cadres needed only to invite the people through a loud speaker. People gather for a meeting in minutes." "All they had to do was to invite the villagers two hours in advance," stated another respondent, "and 3,000 to 4,000 persons came for the meeting."

The meetings had a profound effect on the atmosphere in many areas. Peasants who once had been excluded from the political sphere were now being asked to study the issues,

to raise criticisms, to make up their own minds about basic questions in their communities. To an uncommon degree, villages hummed with political debate. A defector reported that,

Usually, the youths in the village liked to talk politics when they attended banquets or when they sat around drinking tea or when they conversed with each other about their daily work. They talked about the world situation, socialism, Russia and China. The old people didn't like to listen to this sort of thing because they thought the youths didn't even know what went on in the village let alone in the world, Russia and China. This used to irritate the old people.

People "joined study sessions day and night," they could not get enough of politics. Official meetings often did not satisfy this new appetite. According to the report of one defector,

(The villagers) were so fond of attending the village meetings that, sometimes, they were regretful that some meetings ended so soon. During these sessions, they lingered around the meeting places, discussing the Front's policies, the cadres' behavior and the cruelty of Diem's regime until late at night.

These passages show that NLF "control" in a particular area was not simply a matter of replacing one kind of "indoctrination" with another, but instead involved the development among peasants of a wholly new way of dealing with political power. The rise of the Front paralleled in fact depended on, the beginnings of self-government in the villages.

Along these lines, one defector thought it was easier to collect taxes in "weak" than in "strong" villages.

The people's comprehension in the "liberated" area is somewhat higher than that of those living

in "contested" areas, and therefore they are less afraid of the cadres. They will protest against the cadres if the classification of the fields is unjust or inaccurate, and this has impeded the collection a lot.

The longer an area was liberated, the harder it became for cadres to act in a high-handed manner. Another defector offered the following view :

When the Front emerged, the people didn't know what it was all about, so they were very afraid of it and treated the cadres very well out of fear. But starting in 1963, if the cadres said something that the people didn't like or didn't agree with, they weren't afraid to argue with the cadres. Some even dared to insult them. After the people understood more about the Front's line and policy, they criticized or insulted the cadres whenever the cadres acted contrary to this line and policy. They were, of course, invited to attend indoctrination sessions for this. The people still like the cadres, but they don't like them as much as they did at the beginning. Before, the people were so afraid of the cadres that they had to butter them up. For example, whenever the cadres came to their houses, they poured tea in cups and set it in front of the cadres. Now, when the cadres come to them, they just ask the cadres if they would like some tea. If the cadres say "no," then they let it go at that, and no longer respect the cadres as much as before, because they know more about the Front and are no longer afraid of the cadres.

What people learned from exposure to the NLF was to make up their own minds, to speak up when they disagreed with decisions, to hold cadres to the commitments they had made. Even more fundamentally, a process of demystification is at work here. The Front brought political authority down to earth, stripped leaders of any super-natural aura, encouraged peasants to see them as ordinary villagers who

do not have to be "battered up." The better people understand the organization, this witness seems to be saying, the less they have to fear from its leaders. The more the Front asserted itself, the more sure people were of their own judgment and power.

Our examination of NLF methods of mass mobilization would be incomplete if we dwelt on an image of peasant assemblies seething with enthusiasm. The eloquence of the cadres was not intended to persuade villagers to storm out of meetings and to throw themselves on the nearest GVN post. Deepening commitment was harnessed to a daily practice characterized by patience, caution and steadiness rather than headlong audacity. The militance the Party worked to arouse was just the opposite of recklessness, and in fact the reason why people responded to the NLF "line and policy" was precisely because Front cadres did not ask them for impossible feats of courage, but instead confined themselves to requests which they knew were within the capabilities of the villagers. Approaching the task of waging guerrilla war in this spirit, NLF cadres broke down the process into smaller and smaller steps, until the human participation which it entailed at any one moment was within the purview of the peasants who would have to carry the burden of the struggle.

We can observe this finely differentiated tactical approach at work right from the first days of the NLF. In 1960, when the Front began, the old Viet Minh organization in the Province had been badly damaged by Diemist repression. The survivors who, along with other discontented villagers, started to resist had no army and no base area outside of the Plain of Reeds, a traditional guerrilla sanctuary in the northern part of My Tho. According to a POW, in the beginning all the insurgents in Cho Gao District together could muster only seven rifles. The new organization had to figure out how to mobilize a group of frightened, discouraged peasants and help them develop into a military force capable of standing up to the Diem dictatorship. At first, the small band of insurgents, their faces hidden, moved only at night. One respondent recalled how they

appeared suddenly in the people's houses, forced

them to turn off all the lamps, then introduced themselves as members of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam and requested the people to contribute money to feed the troops. Before going to see a family, the cadres studied the financial situation of the family and determined how much they would have to contribute...

Sitting in the darkness, wondering how to respond to these unidentified intruders — who nonetheless seemed to be well acquainted with the village and its inhabitants — the peasants were “frightened out of their wits.” An interviewee recalls that, “At night when they saw shadows passing by they bolted their doors in a hurry, pretending to be asleep, and didn’t dare to talk loudly.” In their recollections, the respondents almost seem to go out of their way to stress the early insignificance of the movement. At the beginning, the Front had been nothing more than disembodied shadows, a few muffled voices in the darkness.

One of the first things the cadres asked villagers to do was to beat on drums or wooden fish. Why? One respondent explained.

This was to create a fighting atmosphere among the villagers and to make everyone feel that the people were determined to resist the GVN and very united in their actions. Moreover, if we did not force everyone to make noise, no one would dare to carry out our instructions because they were still afraid of being arrested by the GVN. So, forcing everybody to participate in knocking on wooden fish and drums at the same time relieved them from the fear of being denounced by their neighbors.

Intended to create “a fighting atmosphere,” these instructions were carried out by villagers almost paralyzed with fright. “Many of them were so scared of the GVN they closed themselves in their rooms to knock on the wooden fish.” But, as the cadres no doubt expected, perplexed Saigon officials did nothing at all in response to these unor-

thodox provocations, and the insurgents had won their first small victory.

Now the cadres were ready for the next step. Here is one account.

The cadres returned at night and went to every house to call on the people to attend their meeting. Each family sent two or three of its members to the meeting while an elder member would stay home to beat the drums or metallic barrels. Whenever they stopped at one house and succeeded in inviting some villagers to their meeting they would take them along to the next house to invite the other villagers to the meeting. They went on that way until they stopped at every house and the crowd of the villagers became really large up to the place of the meeting. The cadres got the villagers used to meetings by working one whole week on each family as I've just mentioned. On December 1960 they held a large scale meeting at which the cadres put up the Front flag (it is the first time) and announced that "Today the Front is born."

At this point no shots had yet been fired — in fact the NLF still had almost no guns — but, as the respondents looked back, it seemed to them that the noisemaking had marked a beginning. There had been no dramatic mass uprising, no spontaneous storming of the Bastille, but instead a carefully planned very gradual process by which people were, step by step, being encouraged to get together, to think of themselves as a collective force with the ability to defend itself and eventually to fight actively in its own interests. By devoting as much as "one whole week" to each family in an effort to persuade its members to attend a meeting, the cadres were acting on the expectation that the struggle would take a long time to develop, and that their movement would have to be built with patience if it were to be built at all.

The drums and wooden fish were the Front's first weapons. (9) As one respondent put it,

My confidence stemmed from the fact that every night sounds coming from the knocking on everything that could produce a sound, arose from the dark countryside all around my hamlet. This created a diabolical concert which gave all of us a frightening thrill. It made me think the whole population had decided to stand behind the Front and that huge manpower would give the Front the necessary punch to overcome anything.

Peasants who had a healthy respect for the repressive power of the Diem dictatorship would almost certainly not have responded if the cadres had called for an immediate assault on the GVN. The Front asked them to beat on drums and wooden fish because it understood that villagers were not ready for more aggressive collective action, and that noisemaking was one thing they could be persuaded to do together. Subsequent campaigns were marked by the same scrupulous attention to the peasants' mood. Each time ambitious measures were set aside in favor of more modest steps forward, the final moment of victory was pushed further away into the distant future. But even as they began, cadres were convinced that they could mobilize the people only by going slowly. The "diabolical concert" which in 1960 "arose from the dark countryside" thus signalled the beginning of a protracted war.

Front cadres were formed by this kind of political experience. The American media has left us with a "military" image of the "VC" creeping about in the jungle or launching suicide attacks on U.S. bases. Simplistic as descriptions of its soldiers, these stereotypes are particularly unhelpful when we are considering the real work of the NLF. We should see the cadres as "civilians," as attentive students of politics and of village social life. Their interview responses often show a mastery of detail and a highly developed capacity for taking complicated issues, breaking them down in a logical way, and discussing them clearly and convincingly. Some of the more cautious interviewees are non-committal at first. But as the sessions go on, many are drawn out, they cannot resist the temptation to describe lo-

cal politics, we sense their delight with the complexity of a social world in which they had painstakingly learned to function as administrators and leaders.

Most of all, these cadres are talkers. Molded by a routine of constant discussion and collective study, they approach questions in a self-consciously formal way, organizing complicated responses which go on for page after page, leaving plenty of room to explore all facets of the issue under discussion. The RAND translators betray an often uncertain grasp of English grammar and vocabulary, but even so we can feel the impact of these discourses, arresting in their way of reaching out, engaging the attention of the listener, inviting comment, objection—and eventual concurrence. Some cadres repeat word for word whole paragraphs from speeches they remembered hearing, and their versions still ring with eloquence and passion. Fighters in the resistance, these people are formidable not because of their physical prowess or great marksmanship. The Front drew its strength from their ability to think things out together and to “motivate the people”.

By 1965, thousands of peasants had participated in many study sessions and minutely organized campaigns. Time after time, by careful planning, exhaustive group discussion, and well-controlled attacks on Saigon power, the movement had gone forward, always keeping its own casualties to a minimum while inexorably chipping away at the position of its adversaries. This long collective experience gave to the NLF an unparalleled cohesion, discipline and self-confidence. Because it had been nurtured so deliberately, the insurgency had been able to develop a rare solidarity. This was the movement American leaders hoped to crush by escalating the war.

BOMBARDMENT OF THE COUNTRYSIDE

Within the Front, harsh or arbitrary cadres ran the risk of acquiring an unflattering nickname: “Little Ngo Dinh Diem.” With its regime of forced labor and unjust jail sentences, its ARVN troops marauding through the countryside, raping and disemboweling innocent villagers, Diemism was a byword for wanton cruelty among the peasants of My

Tho. (10) And yet, for all their ferocity, Saigon authorities had done little to oppose the rise of the NLF. According to one respondent, when the concerted uprising broke out in 1960, "The (GVN) hamlet and village officials did not have any reaction worth mentioning," and many other transcripts contain similar testimony. There was a brief counter-attack in 1962, when the first large-scale use of U.S. helicopters temporarily slowed the Front, but in 1963 the guerrillas once again seized the initiative. After the fall of Diem in November of that year, the NLF regained all the ground it had lost, and asserted itself even in areas of the Province where Saigon authorities had exercised unbroken control all the way back to 1946.

The American response to this situation did not involve any attempt to restore GVN officials to their former positions in the villages, and there were no new programs to win peasant support away from the NLF. Some American infantry units were sent to My Tho in 1967, but on the whole American ground troops in this region did not play anything like the role which was assigned to them in the northern sector of South Vietnam. Instead, US-GVN authorities began to rain down bombs and shells on the countryside.

This new tactic represented a sharp break from former practice. Early in the war, bombing and shelling had been linked to GVN sweep operations, and occasional harassment fire was directed against Front strongholds. Sometimes, when guerrillas shot at a post or a convoy, the nearest Saigon installation retaliated with a barrage of shells. "Since 1962, the GVN artillery has never stopped pounding my village" a defector observed in 1965. He meant that shelling occurred "once every two or three months." Later on, villagers were sometimes shelled without provocation, but even in these cases a certain restraint was exercised. The bombardment took place at a fixed time of day, so that the villagers learned to anticipate and to take shelter at the appointed moment.

US-GVN tactics from 1965 on were qualitatively different. This new bombing and shelling was neither linked to individual provocations, nor confined to predictable hours. Instead, vast areas of the countryside were subjected to a more or less constant series of attacks from guns and

planes. Earlier, villagers sometimes used to flee deeper into liberated territory to avoid the danger. But by 1967, as a defector indicated, "Nobody dared to run deeper into Front controlled areas, ... In the villagers' eyes, fleeing that way was equivalent to staying, in that one would run the same risk of getting killed by mortars or by strafing." The firepower was supposed to underline a political point. As a defector put it, "The village was completely liberated. Therefore it was continuously bombed and shelled." The aim of the Americans was not simply to harass or to retaliate against NLF initiatives, but to annihilate those communities in which the Front had sunk such deep roots.

Eventually, many areas were being subjected to incessant attack. Villages were bombed and strafed during the day and shelled at night. In some areas, helicopter gunships hovered overhead ready to strafe any moving individual. In others helicopters circled all night, their powerful searchlights illuminating the terrain ("so bright that you can see a needle on the ground"), uninterruptedly strafing the pathways so that movement was impossible. B-52s joined the assault in the summer of 1966 with bombing raids over Front villages. This relentless shelling of the countryside, the creation of free fire zones in areas where hundreds of thousands of people lived and worked, was after 1965 the central reality of the war in My Tho. (11)

The interview transcripts convey a vivid sense of what this bombardment meant to people. "One can die there any moment," recalled a respondent, "and most of the time one has to live in a shelter. Even while eating, one has to stay near a shelter because of the continued mortar-shelling. I finally could not stand such a life." Wherever they went in the village, peasants needed shelters near at hand, and as a result hours of labor time were devoted to the task of digging trenches. The villagers had to be constantly alert, since survival depended on reacting immediately after the first report of long-range guns, the sound of airplane engines, or even the hiss of falling bombs (B-52s could not be heard at ground level). At the first sound, villagers "ran into hiding, gasping for breath." They had to get used to spending a good part of their existence underground, some

even sleeping in subterranean shelters. Eventually they would almost become accustomed to the perpetual crashing of bombs and shells. As one respondent summed up: "The villagers often said: 'Each morning, when we wake up, we don't know whether we are living until we open our eyes.'"

The bombardment was aimed at the peasants. Bombs and shells fell on the clusters of houses at the center of each hamlet, and in the process people's dwellings were destroyed; 400 out of 440 in one hard hit village, according to a local cadre. Returning to his village in February 1967 after being away for seven months, a soldier observed that

the village aspect had also changed a lot. It looked sad and miserable, with burned houses and wildly grown grass everywhere. I had the feeling that I had lost my way and that where I stood looking around wasn't the location of a former hamlet. My house no longer existed. All that was left of it was a devastated earthen floor. The deserted place made me scared and I hurried to leave it.



Hospital

Firepower destroyed the orchards, which in most hamlets were located near the peasants' homes, thus knocking a vital prop out of the local economy. "It takes the people from five to seven years to tend their fruit trees before they can get any income from their orchards," a respondent explained. Animal husbandry also suffered. Livestock was killed by bombs and shells, or stolen by ARVN soldiers during sweeps. As villagers moved out of their houses into the open fields to escape the bombardment, they had to sell their remaining animals, since there was no room among the rice crops to maintain them properly.

Agricultural productivity sharply declined. Buffaloes along with other animals were killed or sold, thus depriving the peasants of a major source of labor power, essential for effective plowing. In addition, the amount of cultivated land decreased because peasants were afraid to stay out in the open too far from their trenches. Work was often interrupted when villagers were strafed by passing planes, or when shells exploded nearby. Bombing and shelling completely upset the usual patterns of work. According to a respondent,

No one could farm his land on time and according to the seasons, instead he had to wait for the time when there was no bombing, no shelling and no operations being conducted. In short, a quiet time before he could work on his land. There were times when we just got through ploughing and planting when amphibious vehicles destroyed all our efforts. Night or day, it didn't matter any longer, as long as there was no harrassment, we worked on our land. It has been a year now that farming has become a thousand times more difficult because the war has escalated, operations were conducted continuously, bombing and shelling rained on us night and day.

After crops were planted, farmers never knew when further military operations would deprive them of their harvest. Amphibious vehicles passing across the fields tore up the rice crop, and, as a respondent explained, "one napalm

bomb could destroy a plot of land 50 meters wide and 100 meters long." "Right now, it's almost as though the village isn't producing anything," commented this same observer, as he reflected on the ruins of his village.

Bombing and shelling also curtailed commercial activity. "Not everyone could do commerce in this day and age," stated one female peasant. "Only the adventurers who weren't frightened by GVN bombing and shelling or intimidated by Front checking and taxing could do it." Moving goods to market in liberated areas, where all roads were routinely strafed, could be a fatal proposition. Thus the fire-power which prevented peasants from working their land properly and then destroyed many of the crops they did succeed in cultivating, finally stood in their way when they attempted to sell what little surplus they had managed to accumulate.

By destroying their houses and livelihood, US-GVN authorities hoped to force the villagers who were not killed by the bombardment to move out of their Front controlled communities, to "leave the VC behind." But the task of prying the people loose from their native lands required a sustained effort.

The people were afraid of bombs and bullets if they stayed in an insecure area, but they did not want to give up their land. What they really wanted was to move temporarily to the nearest GVN-controlled area, not necessarily a New Life Hamlet, then come back to their native hamlet when the GVN restored security to their hamlet.

Or, as another respondent put it, "I think these refugees only left their villages temporarily. Sooner or later they will come back to their villages, because I am sure that they will miss their orchards, their ricefields and the tombs of the ancestors, and because they lived on their orchards and ricefields." In other words, a bombardment which appeared to be only temporary would not achieve lasting results. During attacks, villagers were likely to cluster along the nearest major highway or canal, the traditional nerve centers of GVN strength, where Front forces

were reluctant to appear and which were seldom bombed or shelled. Other peasants took refuge in a nearby military post or new life hamlet. But almost all tended to move "back to the village when things calmed down." In one hamlet, the villagers

each bought a sampan. Every afternoon they took their wives and children and brought along their belongings in their sampans and sailed for the GVN-controlled zone where they would stay overnight in their relatives' or acquaintances' houses. The following morning, they would return to the village if the situation permits. The reason is that my village has been heavily bombed and shelled at night time.

Others practiced a similar routine, sleeping in makeshift huts near a highway, a canal or a GVN post. Frightened as they were, these peasants still had not completely left their homes. Insofar as it was possible, they continued to live "out there" with the NLF.

Continuing escalation forced the peasants to set aside these expedients and to adopt more drastic measures. In many villages, the inhabitants dismantled or abandoned their homes and moved out into the ricefields where they lived in temporary huts. By scattering out across the countryside, they hoped to present a less conspicuous target for US-GVN bombardment. But, as a POW recalled, the fields were eventually to become just as dangerous as the center of the village :

They built shacks in the middle of the field to live in, but still didn't feel protected in the field. Whenever an airplane flies by, everyone stands still because if anyone runs out or into the house there will certainly be strafing. It is also because of this hanging threat that few people dare leave their children at home alone and go out to earn more money. Children aren't aware of the danger, when they see airplanes, and running here and there, thus brings much harm to the entire hamlet.

As the scope of the bombing and shelling increased, the whole village area became unsafe. In one community, the Front built "dummy houses" in an effort to draw off the bombing and shelling, but the tactic did not work because "the ARVN airstrikes and artillery firing were all over the village, and no place was spared." Inexorably, US-GVN military authorities were establishing their own peculiar kind of credibility. They were prepared to bomb and shell indefinitely and at an every intensifying rate all over the countryside until the people finally gave up and left their homes for good.

Gradually the peasants were worn down by this ceaseless punishment. One respondent described his neighbors' reactions in the following way :

In the beginning a great majority of people did not want to move out of the hamlet thinking that the war would end within two years at most. But when they realize that after almost six years of fighting, bombing and shelling is far from being over and, in fact, is even more violent, they seem to lose all their hopes. Worried and frightened they finally flee the VC to settle in safe areas.

Another witness testified to a similar evolution of opinion :

Eighty percent of the villagers have evacuated to government areas, because of relentless bombings and shellings and three-fourths of the cattle in the village have been killed by planes. There is a great shortage of man-power and buffaloes in the village. The situation is getting more and more critical. Two years ago, in spite of relentless bombings and shellings, people still managed to farm their land just to get enough rice to satisfy the needs of their families. Those who had a lot of land, of course, could not expect to till every inch of it because it was so difficult to hire workers. But by early 1967, the peasants began to evacuate the village. It was no use to till the land because

none could say for sure what would become of their crops under the present circumstances. If a sweep operation was launched in the area, their ricefields, except those situated...in the vicinity of New Life Hamlets, would be completely destroyed by government amphibians.

Even large-scale evacuation did not seem to stem the almost maniacal bombardment. "It made no difference to the aircraft that the hamlet was deserted, remembered a defector; "they continued to bomb it all the same."



The Village of An-Than After a Bombardment

"GENERATING" REFUGEES

US-GVN bombardment "generated" refugees because it destroyed those social arrangements which gave form to the lives of the villagers. In the countryside, just about everyone was tied to the land. As one defector explained, "A piece of property in the village, however big or small it was, represents the results of hard work and savings through many generations, and the villagers were very reluctant to leave it behind for an unknown future." Tailors,

carpenters, barbers, "also cultivate their land," noted a POW; "therefore, they are also considered farmers." The village medic was likely to be a landowner, and so was the schoolteacher, one of whom commented that he preferred his village to life in Saigon; "living on my garden," he affirmed, "I had enough to eat." Even the local cadres were peasants first, and when it seemed that the Front might be forced out of a village, they reacted like any other smallholder. A defector from an area in which the NLF was on the defensive, noted that

The village cadres will have to live in other villages. This is exactly their biggest fear. How could they make a living in an alien village? They have no houses to dwell in and no land to till. They don't get any pay from the Front, either. They simply will have to starve. They couldn't assist their relatives, either. The prospect is frightening and their morale has declined.

Close relationship to the land was a trait shared by all members of the village. It was the basic element giving substance to rural society. US-GVN bombs and shells were supposed to sever this bond between peasants and their fields, and thus to demoralize and ultimately to disperse the community from which the Front drew its strength.

For the peasants, land and subsistence went together. The decision to leave home was postponed because people were not sure they could survive without farming.

These villagers had moved from their orchards to the middle of the paddy fields to take care of their fields. If they moved further away it would be difficult for them to take care of their ricefields. This is why they had to cling to their land and run the risk of getting shelled and killed. The people there lived on farming, if they left their lands they would starve to death. They were families with many children to feed. If they moved to the New Life Hamlets, they would have no means of making

their living and they would not be able to feed their families. Even if the government distributed money to them, it would do so for a few months only, and after that they would have to be on their own. If they stayed with their land, they were sure of having rice to eat for a long time. Some of them who had gone to the New Life Hamlets to live for a while came back and said that the allowances that the government gave them were not enough. These were the reasons why they decided to stay with their ricefields in order to make their living.

The cautious peasants were not tempted by other ways of making a living. Wages or government doles were temporary devices, "for a few months only," but families with land "were sure of having rice to eat for a long time," indeed forever.

Living in an urban, wage labor economy, we may skip too quickly over these statements, without fully comprehending the depth of the villagers' concern about leaving home. Peasants were perplexed when confronted with the prospect of leaving the one resource from which they had always drawn the means of life. As a respondent recalled :

Most of (the villagers) had a large family and they didn't dare to move elsewhere. How could they feed all their children without land to till? So they just resigned themselves to the conditions in the liberated area and clung to their land to make their living.

"If one has land, one can live easily," affirmed another respondent. By contrast, those who were forced to depart seemed pitifully uprooted. The refugees "were in one place and their land was somewhere else," observed a third interviewee. "Even though they received GVN assistance, their standard of living was still lower than before."

Leaving the village was not just a matter of economics, of balancing accounts and deciding which environment guaranteed the steadier income.

Everyone wanted to live, everyone was afraid of death, and everyone wanted to live in secure areas, but the people had to remain in the hamlet because the situation forced them to do so. They had never been outside their native hamlet, and they didn't know of any other means of making their living besides farming. They were afraid that if they moved to the GVN areas, they wouldn't have any means of earning their living, and they would be lost and starve to death.

The peasants sensed that "they would be lost" if they moved out of the village. In a strategic or new life hamlet or in the district town, in My Tho City or in Saigon, they found a new world, run according to a strange set of rules. A defector offered this analysis :

The Strategic Hamlets were too crowded and the cost of living was too high. The people would have to buy everything, a stick of firewood, a handful of vegetables, a red pepper, a tomato, things which had been abundant and taken for granted when the people were living in their own village. Yet once they moved into a Strategic Hamlet, those things became scarce and they'd have to spend hundreds of piasters to buy them. In the village, one could catch a few fish in just a moment in the swampy field and one's meal would be completed. In the GVN-controlled area, one has to buy practically everything.

In this respect, and in many others, such a move disrupted a thousand small routines. For example, according to one respondent,

The men wanted to move to the GVN areas, but the women didn't like the idea. They were used to life in the hamlet where their children had the run of the orchards. When they had some spare time they could go fishing and work in the fields or or-

chards. Whereas if they moved to the cities, they would have to rent a small house for 300 or 400 piasters a month. They would be very crowded and they couldn't do anything to help add to the income of their families. Their husbands would be the only ones to work and support the families, while they would just sit at home.

Refugees were not just changing one residence for another. Bombing and shelling compelled them to abandon a whole social world, with its network of habits and relationships, and to plunge into an alien environment for which they were radically unprepared.

The disintegration of rural society was particularly marked in the area west of My Tho City where in 1966 US-GVN forces began to build the Dong Tam military base. The lands of many peasants were seized, and, in the process of construction, other adjoining fields were made unfit for cultivation. Meanwhile, counterinsurgency efforts in the District were escalated to a crescendo unmatched anywhere else in the Province. Bombing, shelling and sweep operations were intensified in order to drive the NLF back, and permanent garrisons camped in some villages to keep guerrilla forces away from the American military installation.

Many peasants had to move to make way for the base. Before they left, the Saigon dictatorship offered them a "compensation" for the property it had taken, an ineffectual gesture which crystallized the gap between the GVN regime and the villagers. As if peasants could be compensated for the loss of their land! In fact there was no way to "compensate" rural dwellers for their stolen fields, except perhaps by providing them with another source of subsistence which they could count on for the rest of their lives and which could then be passed on to their children. "Fair" compensation would also include membership in a new community, with its own carefully developed and integrated culture, comparable to the old village community which they had been forced to leave. This "equity" on the part of the Saigon regime must have provided a bitter consolation for the villagers so catastrophically uprooted.

Saigon authorities also overlooked the fact that many property arrangements in the countryside were regulated by custom and oral agreement rather than written rules and contracts. As a worried peasant explained: "There were many villagers who rented land from the landlords without making any contracts, and, for this reason, they won't be able to obtain any compensation." Some absentee landlords were thus provided with an unexpected windfall. When the NLF established itself in the village, it usually ordered either the confiscation of lands belonging to absentee owners or that no rents be paid to landlords who did not come personally to collect them. The Saigon government ended up paying "compensation" to many landlords for holdings which they had already written off as casualties of NLF land reform. In all these respects, the issue of compensation represents in a concentrated form the essence of US-GVN social policy. People living in one culture, with its subsistence economy and semi-socialized property arrangements, its customary and face-to-face way of doing things, and its intimate relationship to nature, were being forcibly recruited into another, very different culture, based on wage labor, written law, private property and life in crowded urban slums.

Certain American academics have claimed that the United States has been speeding the "urbanization," the modernization of South Vietnam. (12) The interview transcripts document this process and give us a special insight into its consequences for the inhabitants of the countryside. The success of the "American style urban revolution" depended in part on its ability to create its own constituency among the transplanted peasants. And in fact the interviews inform us that a few villagers were able to make a successful adjustment. A respondent noted that, "Of the refugees, only those who had specialized jobs, such as tailors, merchants, alcohol makers, etc., became more prosperous easily." "Most of those who left my village to take refuge in town were middle farmers or richer people who could afford to live there," stated another respondent. A third remembered that, "Many left in 1965, especially those who had money." Still another witness pinpointed similar factors :

The first who left their property to go and settle down in GVN-controlled areas were small land-owners and middle-class farmers. They have some money and a trade, so when they were settled in the GVN-controlled areas, they did not fear unemployment, as they could live a decent life there.

For the commercially minded, life in Front areas was often difficult, since taxes were high and labor scarce and expensive. These villagers might actually profit from the new circumstances. "A few people earn their living by selling food, or trading in rice in the My Tho marketplace, and thus have some income," remarked one respondent. "These fortunate people are leading an easier life than most others." The peasants mentioned here, and others like them, might be ready to applaud the transformation engineered by the Americans.

But most refugees "didn't know anything about trading" and were at a loss when suddenly confronted with a strange world, so different from the one they had left behind. Even prosperous peasants might shrink from the prospects of such dislocation. The reflections of one woman defector bear this out:

My parents live on farming and they own quite a lot of land. They are afraid that they won't be able to make a living if they move to the city. At any rate, they don't want to leave their house and land. Besides they are old and they don't know what to do once they move to the city. My older sister has asked them to come here and promised to give them 2000 piasters per month, but my parents have refused.

For these peasants, the "urban revolution" brought about by the war was a catastrophe. For as long as possible they shunned it, clinging to their lands in spite of endless bombing and shelling.

The economic stagnancy of the Saigon zone only made matters worse. The strategy of generating refugees was

socially disastrous for the Vietnamese not only because peasants were forced to abandon their land, and the culture which went with it, but also because there were almost no jobs in the areas where most refugees sought a new home. The main employer in the GVN areas was the government itself. The fact that so many defectors ended up as pacification cadres, spies, and GVN soldiers had little to do with the political appeal of the Saigon regime. Here is the way one defector approached the matter.

My aspiration is to work for some agency so that I can support my wife and children. I want to work at the American base — doing things like scooping dirt, or mixing cement, because I'm not a strong man. I think that I can make more money working for the Americans, but the only thing is that the job might not last long. If I work for the GVN Rural Reconstruction or Armed Propaganda teams I'll get paid less but the job will last longer. My specialty is farm work, but now I no longer have any land to till. Before, I rented my rice fields...but this land has been seized, and besides, by next year the dredge will have blown mud all over it.

It would be interesting to know how this peasant really feels about working for the Americans building a base which, almost literally, lies right on top of the land he has just lost. In any case, we can see what he would most like to do. "My specialty is farm work," he observes laconically, the language grotesquely deforming the social and cultural existence of the peasant into a "job," one "specialty" among many. As a result of US-GVN pacification efforts, "farm work" is the one "specialty" no longer open to him. Once he has accepted this reality, the rest follows more or less automatically. If he wants to support his family, he must work for the GVN.

In fact, the genius of the American strategy lay precisely in the fact that it did not depend in any way on the political strength of the Saigon authorities. Once bombing and shelling intensified, circumstances would drive people into the

GVN zone no matter how its officials behaved. The testimony of numerous interview respondents indicates that the decision to leave home was seldom a matter of principle. One defector cited the words of his uncle :

There is too much bombing and firing here. If I was forced to stay here and I could earn 1,000 piasters a day, I still wouldn't stay. I'd rather go hungry, but live in a place where there is no war, no bombing, and no firing. If you keep on living here, I don't think that you can survive long.

A POW remembered his encounters with refugees who said the same kind of thing :

When the refugees returned to their hamlets to cultivate their lands, I met some of them and they said, "We understand that there would not be enough land in the GVN-controlled areas for our cultivation, and our living would be more difficult than over here. However, if we remain in our hamlets, our lives and those of our children would not be safe...."

When urged to return home, another refugee told a cadre : "I have my family charge to look after. Life in the hamlet has been so dangerous that I'm scared and have to move along the canal to live, but I'm always with the revolution." These refugees might still be "with the revolution" in spirit, but nonetheless US-GVN bombardment was inevitably forcing large numbers to "leave the VC behind."

Cadres who had unraveled so many other complex problems now found themselves unable to deal with the political challenge of U. S. escalation. A defector described the discomfiture of local officials in these terms :

At first, when only two or three families moved out to the new Life Hamlet and went back to the village every day to farm their land, the Front cadres kept asking them to return to the village

and making them attend one indoctrination session after another. But now that the majority of the people are doing the same thing, what can the cadres do? Now, they resort to political persuasion and heart-to-heart talks to win the sympathy of the people who had moved out of the village. They told the people: "Please come back to the village. Why do you want to stay in that prison that the GVN has set up for you?" The majority of the people argued with them and said: "If we move back to the village and live here, will the revolution be able to protect us? The village is shelled every day. And then there are those bombings. Will the Liberation Front be able to protect us and our property from these shellings and bombings?" Of course the revolution couldn't protect them, so if the people refused to move back to the village, the cadres just let things go at that. What could they do? They couldn't possibly kill everyone. The Front has to obey the people's will.

When many peasants concluded that they had to choose between survival in the Saigon zone and certain death in their own villages, the Front found itself in the midst of a potentially fatal crisis.

The transcripts show the effects of bombing and shelling in many areas. Even in 1965, one village had shrunk from its original population of about 3,000 to 142. Later on, a defector reported that there were only three families still living in his hamlet. Other respondents noted that one-half, three-quarters, even eighty to ninety percent of the peasants in their villages had fled. As we have seen, military pressure was particularly intense in the area west of My Tho City. To shield the Dong Tam military base, US-GVN authorities mounted an ambitious campaign against the Front in Binh Duc, Thanh Phu and Song Thuan Villages. Massive bombardment drove many inhabitants away and made it impossible for big NLF military units to operate in the area. In the second phase, Saigon troops moved out over the scorched earth, repeatedly driving Front cadres into

hiding, and eventually settling into permanent occupation of the terrain. Few cadres remained in these communities, which were described by the insurgents in 1967 as the three weakest Villages in Chau Thanh District.

The Americans and their Saigon allies next attacked to the north and west, thus dealing a blow to Front organizations in Nhi Binh, Long Dinh and Tam Hiep Villages. After the great victory at Ap Bac Hamlet in January, 1963, Nhi Binh had been the most secure Village in the Chau Thanh region, and as a result the Province military hospital and many District offices were located there. But after 1965, according to one respondent, Ap Bac became "the most shelled place" in the area. Another stated:

The Front hastily boasted to the world that it had started the largest theater of war in the South with the battle of Ap Bac — the biggest and most well-known battle — and how it was fighting a guerrilla war with spike pits, wasps and so on. The whole world admired the Front for it. But, now, if we went down to Ap Bac, we would find that all the spike pits, communication trenches and so on there were gone. Suppose now some people in the world asked the Front to take them to Ap Bac to have a look, the Front would be in a difficult position, because Ap Bac had become a weak Front area.

Long Dinh and Tam Hiep "are the Villages which sheltered the cadres during the Concerted Uprising Campaign," remembered another respondent. Because of their large and wealthy populations of "high spirited people," they were "the two most important villages" in Chau Thanh District. Situated between the Plain of Reeds and the Province Capital City, they served as "the gate to My Tho," and thus always played a vital role in the strategic design of the NLF. Early in 1967, Long Dinh and Tam Hiep, which had already been bombed and shelled, were targeted for special pacification drives. Many of the villagers, who "are well known for their eagerness to dig trenches and for their willingness to continue to stay in their villages," eventually

decided to evacuate. The Front's position was substantially weakened, while for its part the GVN moved a garrison of troops from the ARVN Seventh Division into the area.



"Village Life"

To the west, US-GVN authorities drove a wedge into the liberated zone. Bounded by the Mekong River on the south, and the Indochina Road on the north and west, this territory was known within the NLF as the "20/7" zone, a reference to 20 July 1954, the date of the signing of the Geneva Accords. Bombing and shelling dealt a heavy blow to the insurgency in this 20/7 sector. A village like Bang Long, for example, had played an important part in the Concerted Uprising of 1960. It had always been counted a "strong" area and was the site for a number of Chau Thanh District offices. But under the bombardment, a respondent explained, "local people do not dare to meet for fear of possible danger." Life became "unbearable," and most of the people had moved elsewhere. Cam Son Village suffered a similar fate. Once "the merriest (village) in the liberated area," it was one of the two strongest Front bases in Cai Lay District. According to a defector, Cam Son has "always been considered the center of the Party's indoctrination schools and it was in this Village that big meetings of high-ranking

cadres have often been held." "I think that Cam Son was shelled so intensively," another respondent observed, "because it was one of the first liberated villages." The Seventh Division appeared around Cam Son in 1966 and 1967, setting up a "security belt" and five military posts. Subjected to this heavy pressure, the Front gave ground. Village fortifications fell into disrepair and "many" of the villagers evacuated their homes. A similar deterioration in the NLF position was evident throughout the 20/7 heartland region.

The outlook in Cai Be District to the west was not quite so grave. "I was told that . . . the military and political situation in this District is now better than in the others," noted a respondent in mid-1966. But even in Cai Be, the NLF suffered serious losses. As an example, consider the case of Hau My Village, perhaps the strongest Front village in the whole Province. "Deep in the liberated zone," it had a long tradition of insurgency, going all the way back to the Resistance of the First Indochina War against the French. Hau My was counted one of the "three model NLF villages in all of South Vietnam," and in a number of interviews it was singled out as a key political base for the insurgents. After 1965, US-GVN authorities bombed and shelled Hau My; the remarks of one interviewer suggest that it was hit by B-52 attacks beginning in 1966. Defoliants were also dropped over the community in an attempt to destroy ground cover used by the guerrillas. These attacks hurt the Front. A respondent from one of the hamlets in Hau My noted in mid-1967 "a desperate lack of cadres" in the Village. He described his own settlement as "deserted."

These villages may have been especially hard hit, but the interview transcripts make clear that the same kinds of events were occurring in many other areas of My Tho Province. For the first time in the history of the war, it seemed that the GVN was succeeding in "concentrating the people" in zones under its control. Years of bombardment had finally compelled the villagers "to leave the VC behind."

POSTPONEMENT OF THE "GENERAL INSURRECTION AND OFFENSIVE"

Guerrilla tactics can sustain a struggle for national liberation over a long period of time, but they can never achieve decisive victory. They are the devices of a movement which is unable to fight in conventional terms against its enemies, but which must lie low, conserve its energy, and gradually wear down the adversary. In the final stage of a guerrilla campaign, para-military local units give way to the regular army which the insurgents have gradually assembled. If all goes well, this army fights and wins conventional battles leading to the dissolution of the established government and the end of the war.

In 1964-1965, the NLF entered this apparently crucial stage of guerrilla warfare. With large areas of the countryside under its jurisdiction, the Front organization functioned openly, more and more like an established government, while the division-sized units of its army inflicted a series of crushing defeats on the Saigon forces. Up to that moment, the NLF had relied on volunteers to fill its military ranks and had solicited contributions to pay the bills. However, in preparation for the anticipated final phase of the war, cadres organized a regular system of taxation and instituted universal conscription in the villages. These moves were highly successful. The Saigon government was driven to the verge of collapse, and as a consequence the United States had to make what for a great power was a humiliating choice: should American leaders acquiesce in the defeat of their GVN allies? Or should they risk an international crisis by sending substantial military forces into South Vietnam to stop the NLF? But when the United States did intervene, the inherent dangers of the Front's initiative came to light. At the moment when the Pentagon started to increase its efforts, the guerrilla movement was fully extended, its cadres geared for a showdown, its peasant supporters exerting every effort to win key battles and thus bring the liberation war to a rapid, successful conclusion. Just when the United States began to escalate, the NLF was fully mobilized, its reserves already committed to the struggle.

U.S. intervention sent shock waves throughout the countryside. Here was a new adversary on the battlefield, incomparably more powerful than any the insurgents had faced up to that time. One respondent remembered a depressing conversation with a friend in the summer of 1965. "A district committee member disclosed to me one night when we had dinner together that the United States was a very strong and rich country. He stressed that only one American capitalist could finance this war for a full year." Even the most dedicated cadres were shaken as the full weight of American power made itself felt. A POW remembered having these reactions :

Formerly when I was in the liberated area, I believed firmly that the Front would win, because it had been able to start from nothing and accomplished a very strong organization and a powerful army. But now, after having compared the strength of both sides, I came to the conclusion that it will be difficult for the Front to win this war, because the U.S. is too rich and too powerful. How is it possible to wear it out? I am too inferior intellectually therefore I cannot tell who will win this war. It is difficult for the Front to win, but probably it is not going to lose, and I am afraid the war might go on and on until the generation of my descendants.

Cadres who thought they had reconciled themselves to the realities of a protracted war suddenly faced the possibility of struggling on far longer than even the most pessimistic observers had imagined. Many had already

been fighting for a long time, and their families were waiting for them to come home and support them, this is why they were all eagerly awaiting the restoration of peace to go home and work for their living. But the war just went on and on, and they became discouraged.

People speculated that "the war would drag on for five, ten, fifteen or twenty years." In such gloomy discussions, one pessimistic prediction led to another. A respondent recalled: "a number of cadres said that if the war lasted this long, the Vietnamese people would all die. They were afraid that the war would last five times as long as the Resistance — 45 years. A number became discouraged..."

Fighters and cadres had to reassess their own individual prospects in the light of U. S. escalation. Instead of looking forward to imminent victory and the satisfactions of a victorious peace, observed a defector,

all of us thought that we would have to die and the cadres also said that we ought to expect to be killed if we were decided to fight for the revolution. They added that our death would serve our children's interests and therefore would be of value.

"I asked myself whether I could stand up under another ten years of fighting," mused another defector. "I saw the possibility of the war dragging on for ten or more years and I felt I couldn't even take another year or two of it, let alone ten. I had what they call in the Front the 'surrender complex.'" Just when the war's most dangerous phase was getting underway, the NLF had to cope with this spreading disappointment and demoralization within its own ranks.

The villagers too were discouraged. Speaking of the situation in 1965, a cadre noted, "All of us agreed that the people were then very tired of the war and that they were also very afraid of it." This fatigue was laced with a certain bitterness. The Front had "promised victory too many times," and people remembered how they had been told of the coming "General Offensive and Insurrection" which would "finish off" the GVN.

The Front said that in April 1965 all the cities would fall in its hands, and there would be no more cities because they would be merged with the countryside — My Tho would be a village of Go

Luy only. But we are in 1966 now, and no such thing has happened. All the fighters, cadres and people know that the Front hasn't been able to do what it promised. At that time all the people had to study about the general insurrection and offensive, but two years have passed since that time, and this is why the people are so pessimistic and dissatisfied with the Front.

The new tax and draft obligations were points of particularly heated controversy. Resistance to such measures had at first been undercut by the expectation that quick victory would both justify the sacrifices and bring them to a rapid end. A defector explained.

The people said that if national reunification was close at hand they would gladly let their children fight for the Front, but since the war was going to last for a long time they didn't (want) to let their children join the Front. They said that their children would run the risk of getting killed, and that with their children gone no one would help them in their farm work.

U.S. escalation meant that even more money and recruits were needed. Within a few months, the end of the war suddenly receded off into the distant future, and the peasants realized that their burdens were bound to increase in the days ahead.

In late 1965, the NLF held "supplementary reorientation sessions" throughout My Tho Province. Province and district representatives stressed the need to prepare for "a long and bloody war," and they indicated how the Front intended to deal with U.S. escalation. The situation seemed grim, but not hopeless. In this crisis, and in the ones to follow, cadres took heart from the history of the movement. Some remembered the events of 1962, when U.S. helicopters terrorized the people, casualties increased, and numerous villages fell to the Saigon regime. Supplementary reorientation sessions then helped the insurgents pull

themselves together, and the Ap Bac battle inaugurated a new phase of expansion for the NLF. Looking back further, many recalled that in 1960 just getting the revolt underway had seemed like a miraculous achievement. As one defector put it,

No movement in the world has expanded as rapidly as the Front did. The Front started to build up its forces right in the midst of the enemy. It neither had weapons nor training schools to train its men. And yet it was able to form Province Mobile Units and then Main Force Units, and expanded very rapidly right in the midst of the enemy. The Americans and the GVN tried to nip it in the bud — by arresting the Front cadres and jailing them in Phu Loi and so on — but failed.

When times were bad, some of the older cadres delved even more deeply into the past. A POW offered this observation :

The government states that it will win. The Front also says that it will win, ultimately. So, it is difficult to predict which side is correct. In Front-controlled areas, cadres and people like to believe the Front's statements because they have been proved correct once before. During the Resistance, they asserted that they would win ultimately. They said so when the people could see nothing which could guarantee that they would win. The Resistance dragged on for nine years, and indeed, they won after the Dien Bien Phu battle. This success has scored an excellent point and has enabled the cadres and people to draw a comparison between this war and the Resistance. This has given much credit to the Front.

One veteran, who had survived many rough periods, remembered 1952, when the French seemed to have excluded Viet Minh influence altogether from Chau Thanh District, as the worst time in the history of the revolution. These seasoned fighters were not about to be stampeded by U. S.

escalation.

According to one report, two factions emerged from the 1965 "supplementary reorientation sessions." On the one hand were "the skeptics" who

believed that the Revolution would definitely fail because the Front couldn't possibly counteract the U. S., a country with such a powerful and well armed force. They also believed that the more the Front prolonged this protracted resistance, the nearer they brought the country to the brink of destruction.

But on the other side, this same observer noted the consolidation of a second group, "the fanatics," who "became more enthusiastic after the reorientation course, believing that their leaders had all the essential factors in their hands to defeat the Americans and to liberate the South." The NLF had been shaken, some cadres had dropped out of the movement, but a hard core of dedicated insurgents returned to their villages to meet with the backbone elements and eventually with the people to explain to them how the Front, with their help, planned to carry on the struggle.

The general policy which the NLF adopted in the 1965-1967 period involved a return to guerrilla warfare. The regular NLF army, which had been concentrated for the campaigns of 1964-1965, found it increasingly difficult to function in subsequent years. The Front had three Main Force battalions operating in the upper Delta and one Local Force battalion which functioned within the boundaries of the Province. But these large troop concentrations, from 500 to 800 soldiers each, had difficulty operating in the conditions created by US-GVN bombing and shelling. Battalions maneuvered for months trying to get into position to attack the GVN without running the risk of prohibitively destructive counter attacks from planes and artillery. To a considerable extent in 1966 and 1967, intensive bombardment succeeded in neutralizing, if not in demolishing, these NLF units. (13) With regular armed forces in the background, local guerrilla units had to carry the brunt of the fighting.

Reemphasizing guerrilla methods was interpreted by some cadres as a step backward. Understanding full well, from a tactical point of view, why it was important to break up large NLF units, these cadres could plainly see that such a step amounted to a strategic retreat. Only regular forces could win the war, and so it naturally followed that withdrawing these forces from action postponed the phase of decisive fighting until some moment in the unforeseeable future. As one respondent put it, "All cadres are very well aware that if they return to guerrilla warfare, they will never be able to win even if they have to fight for one hundred years." Another observer made basically the same point: "In a small nation, we have to progress from guerrilla warfare to modern warfare in order to achieve victory. If the NLF has done the contrary, it will never win this war."

Guerrilla tactics are devices which grow out of military and technological weakness. Cadres were depressed by the abandonment of positional warfare because they harbored no romantic illusions about the nature of the alternative. Following the guidelines of a guerrilla strategy, the peasants of My Tho had to disrupt the environment in which they lived. As a POW observed, such efforts always threatened to cause them as much harm as they did the enemy.

Before a road was destroyed or dug up, or a bridge was blown up, a mass meeting was usually held. There the cadres explained that the sabotage work would be to obstruct the enemy operations in order to protect the lives and property of the population. The villagers easily took the explanation and went on to work as directed. At first, I was surprised. I asked myself why the roads and bridges were destroyed when they had been constructed for the people's own movement. But when I listened to the NLF cadres' explanation, I thought that they were right, and the villagers joyfully carried out the work, too.

Here is an account of the results of such tactics in one village:

At present, only waterways can be used. Roads are completely obstructed since they have been destroyed and planted with booby-traps, spikes, and mines. Furthermore, the NLF has officially forbidden the use of roads in order to facilitate the construction of defensive emplacements to hold out against operations.

Another interviewee noted that, "In 1966, the Village Committee ordered the villagers to destroy every road and bridge and forced the people to use new paths. Spike boards have been planted in the old roads." The Front had no choice about such tactics. Without heavy guns and planes, it could block enemy movement only by ripping up the ground itself.

Fortifying hamlets created the same kinds of problems. On the face of it, digging trenches, cutting and sharpening spikes, and setting booby traps were all pitiful expedients when the adversary had high powered weapons, amphibious vehicles and jet planes. Such fortifications seldom inflicted serious injury on the other side. As one peasant argued to a cadre, "These spike traps are useless and yet we have to dig them all the time. When the soldiers come, they are too smart to walk in the orchards and fall in the traps. They are not as stupid as you think." What was worse, the villagers, as well as their animals were constantly blundering into the traps, which dotted their own fields and orchards. One village adopted the device of posting warnings around each trap; a guerrilla would hurry to remove the notices when enemy troops began an operation. No wonder many villagers resisted requests to maintain hamlet fortifications, since it appeared that their "efforts did not pay off commensurably."

These fortifications did, however, serve a purpose. While they might not deter a large ARVN force, they often discouraged smaller units from entering the village. More important, trenches, spikes and traps won time for the villagers. If "one GVN soldier was wounded," recalled a re-

spondent, "the rest would become cautious and advance slowly." Another interviewee noted that "fighting a guerrilla war without the combat hamlets is just like having no point of support." GVN soldiers "could get at you from all directions," while by contrast the existence of fortifications compelled them to "take a fixed route" into the village. Sentry duty and village self-defence was thus much simplified. Finally, invading troops would be delayed by the obstacles, thus allowing "the Front members enough time to go into hiding and to move their equipment and documents elsewhere."

Fortifying hamlets was dull, hard work, requiring the constant attention of the peasants. The task was particularly frustrating because it produced no dramatic results. Without fortifications, NLF local organization would not have been able to protect itself, but such fortifications had no real offensive potential. At best, they affected the invaders' morale, since U.S. and Saigon troops usually found themselves picking their way through a hostile terrain literally bristling with lethal spikes and traps. (14) But the damage done to the other side was not much greater than to the villagers themselves. A painful trade-off was involved here. The tedious labor of the peasants, plus the inconvenience of booby-trapping one's own hamlet, had to be weighed against the aggravation caused to the opposition. Success depended on the ability of the villagers to outlast the enemy, on their readiness to live with the strain and sacrifice of guerrilla war until adversaries of the NLF could no longer tolerate further combat.

Similar difficulties arose out of the activity of village guerrillas. Such forces do not win wars, or even local engagements, and when they undertake offensive operations, it is usually to harry, to distract, to keep the pressure on enemy units. These tactics become increasingly costly as US-GVN authorities took to employing heavy fire power in response to small-scale NLF initiatives. When guerrillas harassed a post, then retreated through a nearby village, which was consequently shelled, a peasant angrily stated: "It is nonsensical to shoot at the post recklessly like that. If they want a fight they only have to attack the post once

and for all. This reckless shooting only hurts innocent people." In a similar situation, another peasant sarcastically called after the retreating guerrillas: "Why don't you stay here to enjoy the fight?" We can imagine what effect it must have had on the morale of local forces preparing for an engagement to hear villagers affirm: "We all may be killed because of you! They're very strong, don't stand against them! You can't overcome them!" The problem was that guerrillas could not deal with a well fortified GVN post "once and for all" any more than they could stay around to confront much larger enemy units. Still, we can also understand the point of view of peasants who insisted that guerrillas "only cause the people to get killed and to suffer damage, while causing no harm to the GVN at all."



Facing the Enemy

Villagers were particularly angry when the guerrillas shot at passing planes. Here we have one of the most telling images to come out of the war: the Vietnamese peasant firing from the ground at a huge U.S. jet, the guerrilla fighter pitted against American technology. And in fact NLF cadres initially encouraged this kind of shooting, as part of a general effort to maintain morale among local fighters by giving them a sense that they could respond in some way to the firepower being directed against them. But when planes

were shot at, they tended to drop bombs in response. A single sniper could endanger the existence of a whole village, and as a consequence villagers bitterly resented guerrillas who fired randomly at passing planes. In response to this situation, Front cadres gradually developed a complicated set of ground rules which limited shooting at airplanes to certain relatively isolated parts of the countryside. In this instance, considerations of the trade-off involved with a particular tactic led to the decision to restrict its use. Spotter planes might be reluctant to fly over a village which was known for its sniper fire, and of course there was a slight chance that such planes might actually be downed by a shot from the ground. But these costs to the enemy usually did not overbalance the damage done to villages subject to retaliatory bombing and shelling.

The Front could refine such tactics, but it could not give them up completely. Like the destruction of roads or the fortification of hamlets, guerrilla activity was an integral part of NLF strategy. And like these other tactics, guerrilla actions were undramatic and indirect in their consequences. In fact, many of these effects would be invisible to the villagers: the ARVN soldier who decided to desert after narrowly avoiding one too many ugly spike pits during a sweep, the Saigon commander mindful of his reputation, who kept his troops close to base camp because regular small scale guerrilla activity in the area had given him the false impression that substantial Front forces were nearby. The local guerrilla who had time to do farm work because his unit only had to guard one entrance to the village, the cadre who managed to slip into hiding with all the Front's local records, the peasant whose livestock was not stolen because Saigon troops were afraid of the booby traps around his settlement—all were beneficiaries of hamlet fortifications. These tactics were not easy to carry out, and they usually did not produce conspicuously satisfying results, but in the absence of other means, the NLF had no other way of fighting the war.

The liberated zone was a school in guerrilla methods. In countless daily incidents, and in many study sessions, the point of the NLF approach had to be defined. Here is a typical complaint made by a villager to a local cadre:

"The guerrillas can't fight against GVN troops on sweep operations. What possessed them to fire at the troops anyway? They should have kept quiet and let the troops pass. If they had sneaked away quietly, nothing would have happened. But they fired at the troops while they ran away, so the troops shot back and killed my cow that was worth 7000 or 8000 piasters."

In this instance, as in so many others, military operations created a political problem for the NLF.

The Party Chapter heard about this and sent a cadre to see her and apologize. He explained to her why the guerrillas had to shoot at the GVN soldiers, and asked her to accept the incident as a war hazard. The guerrillas' shots were intended to warn the people so they could take refuge elsewhere and to warn the cadres so they could put their documents away and go into hiding.

The peasants were learning the hard way to understand protracted war. Short of the "General Offensive and Insurrection," indefinitely postponed after 1965, they could never finish with the enemy once and for all, they could hurt the other side only a little bit at a time, and for every blow they landed there would be a counterstroke compelling them to pay for their gains with further disruption and sacrifices in their own lives.

The war required a major political effort from the cadres, a constant round of discussion and explanation, so that villagers would be willing to put up with the vexation of local guerrilla tactics. At the same time, the Front also had to support its Main Force units, not only in My Tho, but also in the north, where the NLF army was fighting pitched battles with U.S. forces throughout this period. Military necessity thus led to increased taxation and universal conscription at the local level, just as the war itself, the bombing and shelling, was crippling the village

economy. A popular movement, once so successful at appealing to the "general will," now had to ask peasants to carry on with a struggle which was tearing their society apart and causing a rapid degradation in their standard of living.

Villagers and cadres were trapped by the logic of guerilla war. As the Front grew stronger, the United States was compelled to increase its military effort. In turn, the more fighting intensified, the more the Front had to demand contributions from the peasants. The draft, war-related inflation and other developments brought the conflict home to people in the United States, but at the same time escalation also took an impersonal form, in the shape of bombs, planes, defoliants, and other technological means of destruction. By contrast, the NLF had only one resource with which to fight: the Vietnamese people themselves. When the U.S. built new weapons, the Front had to ask villagers to work harder, to sharpen more spikes, pay higher taxes, send all of their children into the armed forces. On the one side, escalation was to some extent a matter of augmenting the mechanical war-making apparatus, and in this sense American capacity for intensifying the fighting was almost limitless. On the other side, escalation involved a growing political crisis, in which the NLF had to demand even more of peasants already driven almost beyond the limits of endurance by the exigencies of the struggle.

"ROOTING OUT THE VIET CONG INFRASTRUCTURE"

While escalation was forcing cadres to make increasing demands on the peasants, at the same time it was destroying those institutions on which the Front had depended for its political leverage. Bombardment of liberated zones did not just drive people out of their villages, it also disrupted NLF functioning in countless ways. Bombing and shelling made it very dangerous for the people to get together, for whatever purpose. As a defector put it, "The villagers stayed home simply because they thought that a big congregation of people would make the GVN shell them and that was the surest way to get killed." Political meetings were

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scripts are to be trusted, by 1967 almost all Front schools had been closed down.

The delivery of medical services was similarly disrupted. In the early days of the war, the Front maintained hospitals and clinics, often right under the noses of GVN authorities. A defector explained that :

When there was a GVN operation, hospital beds would be dismantled and submerged in the creek, while medicines, bowls, glasses, and wounded soldiers were carried into underground shelter. The villagers did not evacuate, they were educated to tell GVN troops that those houses (used as a medical station) belonged to villagers who had gone to the ricefield. So far, GVN troops have never discovered a wounded soldier or any medical agent, or medicines of the Chau Thanh District medical corps in the three above stations.

In spite of "living integrated with the enemy," doctors and nurses continued to function, and, in one locale, "The medical team were the most loved people in the village." Bombing and shelling destroyed hospitals and medical equipment just as it did schools and houses. To make matters worse, the departure of refugees from the center of the village made it increasingly difficult for medical cadres to be of service to the peasants. A respondent noted that

Whenever the people got sick, they went to the GVN areas for treatment. If they wanted the Front medical personnel to give them injections, they had to walk a long distance in order to find them. The medical personnel stayed in houses that people had abandoned, far off in the orchards. This was why no one went to see them when sick.

The speaker had been strafed while walking in his fields, and had been taken to a GVN doctor. His perspective has been turned inside-out by the bombing. Living in a hut built in the ricefields, he is the one who is located "far away,"

while the medical team remains in the original village. Health, like education, was an area in which US-GVN bombardment dealt the Front a serious blow.

Bombing and shelling also interrupted the activities of Front entertainment teams. The reports of a number of respondents indicate that these troupes had made a significant contribution to the growth of the NLF. Here is a typical description, from a defector :

It was not before 1963 that my village came under Front control. I was then a 17 year old teenager and was very taken in by the happy and excited atmosphere that existed in the village. What impressed me most was the Village Entertainment Troupe which gave all of us a very good time once every one or two months. Whenever it came to my hamlet, the youths were overjoyed and I even neglected meals to be with the troupe all day long. Besides singing songs, the troupe also performed short plays in favor of the Front, and eventually, I heartily welcomed whatever the Front did. That's why when the conscription policy was put in force in (my village) I volunteered to join the Front's armed forces without the slightest hesitation.

Like any other gathering of villagers, audiences attending such presentations were bombed and shelled after 1965, and as a result the work of these troupes was seriously hindered. "Why weren't there any more spectators?" asked one interviewer when this subject came up during discussions with a defector. "Were the people fed up with the shows?" "No, that wasn't it," was the answer :

The people are still very fond of the shows, but they daren't gather to attend them because they feared being shelled. As evidence, instead of attending the shows, they came there when the entertainers were rehearsing for the shows. But on the day of the performance nobody dared to come. The people were convinced that if they gathered in

a crowd, the GVN would find out about it and shell them.

The shows had once stood at the center of a revolutionary culture which the Front was helping to build. According to the testimony of a defector :

The best period lasted from 1962 to 1963. Life in the countryside was a lot of fun. Every village meeting was followed by a show given by the village entertainment team and the villagers were very eager to attend them. At night, the people stayed up late to drink or to chat. We didn't have to worry about shellings.

After 1965, the disappearance of the entertainment teams indicated that this revolutionary culture was in deep trouble.

The most important institutions to fall apart under the bombardment were the popular associations. These organizations, "the reserve forces of the Revolution," served both as local organs of self-government and as schools of revolutionary politics, from which the Party recruited its own membership. "An association or a group is a bridge connecting the people with the Party," remarked one analyst; "To get to the Party, one must go through an association or a group." Associations were entrusted with much of the day-to-day detail of local administration, and their officers, the neighborhood Party members and backbone elements, were the leaders of hamlet and village. Associations mobilized the people, they were the vehicle through which the Front's line and policy was translated into action.

The Liberation Youth's Association was primarily responsible for recruitment, and from its ranks the Front drew most of its soldiers. Especially in its early days, this had been a revolution of young people. "I joined the Front almost immediately after I went back to my village," remembered one POW.

I was then a youth and was very excited by the atmosphere the Front had created in the village. The villagers knocking on drums and wooden fish every night, the explosions of fire-crackers, which I took for rifle shooting from afar, all these sounds excited my young mind longing for adventures and changes. It certainly was not what the mature and aged men felt; they were rather afraid of all these events.

The Liberation Youth's Association was the most important of the popular organizations during the first years of the revolution, when the army and local administration were being set up. But as time passed, several factors tended to empty the villages of their young people. Many were killed in the regular or the guerrilla forces, and others died under bombing and shelling. Since both the Front and the Saigon regime were increasingly rigorous about enforcing conscription, young men found it difficult to evade military service. Finally, the youth, along with everyone else, joined the flow of refugees who from 1965 on were making their way into the more secure GVN areas. As a result of all these developments, few young people remained in the villages, and many Liberation Youth's Associations ceased to function.

The Women's Association was responsible for the mobilization of women and for enlarging the political and social role they played in the village. More generally, it was in charge of "motivating the people," of presenting them with the requests of the Front and getting them to participate actively in its campaigns. As we have seen, the constant work of persuasion was the essence of the Front's political practice, and in this sense the Women's Association worked at the very center of the insurgents' local effort. Women convinced the youths to enlist, the farmers to pay taxes, the villagers to build fortifications. Finally, the task of conducting political struggle against the GVN was also among the duties of the Women's Association. Women participated in demonstrations, protest marches and petition

drives in an effort to keep GVN officials on the defensive by forcing them to justify their actions as the "official" government to the people they claimed to represent. This form of agitation, called "face-to-face struggles" by the interview respondents, had been particularly important in 1962, 1963 and 1964, after the Diemists had lost the initiative, but before U.S. escalation lent a new ruthlessness to the Saigon regime, and in this period Women's Association was the most important mass organization in the villages.

By 1965, the Women's Associations were encountering growing obstacles. In the first place, political struggle with the GVN was no longer feasible. In the old days, no matter how repressive they may have been, Saigon officials nonetheless imagined that they were competing politically with the NLF, and so when demonstrations materialized outside their offices, they felt some obligation to give the protesters a hearing and to consider their petitions. (15) But with escalation, the GVN attitude hardened. Demonstrators were frequently beaten or jailed, and some were threatened with strafing from the air if they returned. In any case, massive bombardment was creating a new kind of atmosphere in the villages. Marches and protests were ineffectual gestures when the adversary was systematically attempting to pulverize the countryside in which the protesters lived. The Women's Association could not convince people to participate in "face-to-face struggles" under such conditions. At the same time, with more men either killed or in the army, women were forced to take over work in the fields, leaving them with less time for other activities. The difficulty in holding meetings, and the departure of many Association members from the village, when combined with these other developments, all contributed to the decline of many Women's Associations.

The Farmers' Association could not escape from this general process of dissolution. According to one respondent, the Association was "composed of the basic elements of the revolution, that is, the poor farmers between 18 and 55," and its members were expected "to play the role of vanguards in every duty required by the Front." After cadres had discussed policy with backbone elements, the two

groups worked together in meetings of the Farmers' Association, supporting each other and setting a good example for the rest of the villagers. In such meetings, peasants heard backbone elements reiterate the cadres' point of view and observed that they took the lead in paying taxes, volunteering for work on hamlet fortifications, and promising to participate in various combat support functions like transporting ammunition or carrying the wounded away from nearby battlefields. In 1965, the Front was powerful in part because its Farmers' Associations were thriving. A well-informed defector noted that "the Farmers' Association is a very strong association because it enjoys very good and inspired leadership and a very wide spread organization throughout the countryside. It will not do the GVN any good if it tries to break it up by means of arrests and torture as Diem had done before."

What "arrests and torture" could not do was to some extent accomplished by bombing and shelling. From 1965 on, the constant drain of population away from the liberated zones hurt the Farmers' Associations severely. Many members became refugees, others were killed, and the survivors were discouraged and hesitated to attend meetings. Gradually this organization, along with the other popular associations, went into decline. In many villages, maintaining the skeleton of the old associations, "one or two cadres in the leadership positions," was the most that could be salvaged. "In actuality, the Front's organizations in these hamlets could be considered as non-existent," remarked one observer, during a discussion of his own locale, "because the cadres were there but there were no villagers left for them to work with. The Farmers' Association Executive Committee still exists but it doesn't have any members." With its "infrastructure" at least partially "rooted out," the Front had lost a good deal of its political force.

Such damage was serious, but not fatal to the Front. As we have noted, the key to the NLF's local effort was the sequence of meetings linking district office to village cadres to backbone elements to the villagers in their hamlets. This vital communications system was responsible for the transmission of information and the inculcation of fighting spirit

throughout the countryside. Designed to withstand even the worst shocks, the system nonetheless began to break down in 1966 and 1967.

In the first place, bombing and shelling disrupted relations between villages and district offices so that organizing even one single meeting now required a major effort. To begin, a site was chosen. "The terrain should be favorable," explained a respondent, "and we should be able to disperse easily. The people living in the area should be good elements, and the area should be one that wasn't often shelled or bombed." Once this decision was made, liaison agents "were sent out right away" to contact local Party members, since the mails were unreliable, and people were likely to "say that they hadn't received the invitations we sent them." Party members were taken to "a temporary gathering place," then, if the situation was favorable, they were assembled at the real meeting site. Meanwhile, local guerrillas dug trenches and shelters for the participants. The discussion itself was likely to be interrupted, and the noise of nearby bombs and shells was enough to distract some members, making it hard for them to concentrate, and leaving them, at the end of the meeting, not quite sure that they had fully digested the points of the day.

Returning to their villages, local cadres were faced with similar difficulties. Many of the less determined officials found it impossible to carry on with the normal procedures, a point which emerges in one respondent's discussion of the "incorrect method of motivating the people to pay taxes."

Those Village Secretaries whose comprehension was limited did not initiate the campaign in accordance with the procedures. Others wanted to save time and held indoctrination sessions for both the Party members and the Popular Associations members. This way of initiating the campaign is called "Initiating with overhead leaps." In light of the Party's experience, this way of proceeding never brings about success.

When backbone elements met with Party members before

the latter had been fully convinced of the soundness of a new policy, the subsequent discussions did not go smoothly. After all, if the Communists and "vanguard" elements seemed to hesitate, few of the other villagers were likely to participate with enthusiasm. Half-hearted cadres who approached popular associations without having fully prepared could only add to the growing mood of demoralization. Here is a defector's account :

I saw that many popular organizations were beginning to disintegrate, because I didn't see them holding meetings and carrying out activities as regularly as the Party regulations would have it. As for the Labor Youth Group and the Party, they were still in operation but they lacked a sense of responsibility. The group as well as the Party were only executing the directives handed down to them from above, and in a too mechanical manner. They simply received the resolutions from above, discussed them summarily in a Party Chapter meeting and then executed them right away, leaving out entirely the studying part of them. Previously, following closely to the principles, as soon as any directives or resolutions were received from the Party, the Party Chapter only executed them when all the Group or Party members had already been clear about the directives and were determined to carry them out. Only in this manner could the mission achieve the required targets.

Ostensibly, the system was still functioning in a normal way, but the essential ingredient, "the studying part," from which in the past real conviction and enthusiasm had been derived, was now missing.

The sequence of meetings was supposed to convey information up to the District level as well as send instructions down into the villages. But escalation made it just as hard for the local cadres to enlighten their superiors as it was for the higher echelons to give proper guidance to village and hamlet representatives. Before dispatching delegates

to district meetings, local Party Chapters were supposed to get together so that "weak and strong points were reviewed, checked and summarized." But in 1966 and 1967, "continuous GVN operations and airplane attacks" led to the cancellation of such meetings, so that the Village Party Secretary was forced to visit each of the other local cadres individually. As a consequence,

the branches and structures cadres could make false claims without having to worry about their claims being checked or their strong or weak points reviewed because the Party Chapter Committee members could no longer hold meetings to determine and measure the overall successes of their activities in the village.

Without collective discussion, Party Secretaries did not have a good grasp of the situation in their villages, and as a result they were much less effective at keeping district cadres in touch with local affairs.

When cadres and backbone elements were poorly prepared, the general perfunctory quality of their presentation was immediately apparent to the villagers. As one defector noted, of the officials in his area,

The cadres were uninspiring. When they held meetings they kept repeating the same arguments over and over again because their level of understanding was low. In the end, the people in the hamlet refused to come to the meetings because they said that there never was anything new at the meetings.

In any case, villagers attending meetings in 1966 and 1967 were bound to be more skeptical and unfriendly than they had been in previous years. The Front was asking more and more of them, in the form of taxes and labor services like digging trenches and carrying ammunition, while at the same time bombing and shelling made village life close to unbearable. As a result, the atmosphere in local meetings

was tense, and cadres whose self-discipline faltered ran the risk of losing control of the progressively more delicate negotiations between themselves and the peasants.

One respondent described the danger in these terms:

Before, the Front cadres used to say that the Front's expansion was due to the fact that the people contributed their opinion to the cadres and informed them of many things that were going on. It was also said that when the Front committed an error, the people contributed their opinion and, therefore, helped the Front correct these errors and serve the people better. It was claimed that the cadres worked in a democratic manner because they listened to the people and didn't order the people around arbitrarily, as the mandarins used to do. But now, the people no longer contributed their opinion to the cadres, or supported them. The cadres are now isolated from the people, from the political point of view. This was why, when the cadres told them something, the people didn't listen to them, because they thought that what the cadres said wasn't close to the truth. This was why, when the cadres asked them to do something, the people refused to do it because the cadres couldn't convince them of the necessity of the tasks entrusted to them. When the people refused to perform these tasks, the cadres screamed at them, but in so doing, they behaved exactly like the mandarins, and this attitude, in turn, isolated them further from the people.

In situations like this one, cadres had come full circle. Representatives of a movement which had promised to deliver peasants from the oppressions of the old regime, they were now forced by the weight of circumstances into "screaming" at the villagers, and behaving "exactly like the mandarins." Such behavior only "isolated them further from the people," thus making the crisis even more serious than it had been before.

The central flaw described in the above episode, and in others like it, is that "the people no longer contributed their opinion to the cadres." This hardening of the peasants into a mutinous silence was the one possibility most feared by the cadres, who had to intervene immediately and to do everything possible to halt the villagers' downward spiral into a stubborn apathy. "They kept silent when we spoke to them," noted one discouraged cadre; "We had to urge them to let us know their feelings." Another respondent commented that, "the villagers were fed up with (the cadres), therefore nobody felt like criticizing them." Once this process gained momentum, it might be impossible to reverse. "I am a good citizen," announced one peasant to an importuning cadre. "I have not done anything against the Front. Therefore it is up to you to decide my fate. I am resigned to accept any treatment the Front wants to impose on me, because I have no choice." Such comments were full of historical irony. In response to cadres who demanded their participation in the political process, some villagers, with a perverse shrewdness, adopted the traditional attitude of peasants confronted with an alien authority. Deliberately, they chose resignation. Almost mockingly they insisted on offering nothing more than a sullen obedience.

The NLF communications system could spread demoralization almost as quickly as it once had promoted high morale throughout the countryside. Cadres who failed to enlist the full cooperation of the peasants in their hamlets, who found themselves quarreling fruitlessly and eventually losing their tempers, would have to report back to district officials that they had fallen far short of district goals. As usual, they would be strongly criticized by their superiors who always started with the assumption that political persuasion could overcome any problems among the people. From this point of view, difficulties in the village were invariably blamed on local "cadres' lack of effort in motivating the people to participate eagerly in carrying out the Front's policies," as one respondent put it. Along the same lines, another interviewee noted, "In there, the Front usually stated that there weren't any bad villagers and if there were any it was just because the cadres hadn't indoctrinated

them well, and not because they were against the Revolution." The Party members being criticized, who saw every day at first hand the terrible destruction caused by the war, must have come to resent this kind of criticism, which seemed to disregard objective circumstances prevailing throughout the countryside. With relations thus embittered, discussion of the latest policies was not likely to prove fruitful, and local cadres were as a result even less well prepared than before when they returned to their villages to launch new campaigns.



Digging Anti-Tank Traps

The NLF method of operations was also flawed in that it required plenty of time to function smoothly. The complicated and time-consuming process of maintaining morale had to work within the context of an escalating war. When villages were hard hit by bombs and shells, or when unusually punishing GVN sweeps took place, a cumbersome sequence of adjustments was set in motion. While the villagers milled about in confusion, rumors of new disasters mingled with grief for the victims, and with many packing

their bags to leave home, cadres had to resist the temptation to throw all their efforts into an immediate stop-gap response. Answering the aggression would take time. The first step was to rebuild the spirits of Party members. A respondent reported that after a sweep,

The Party Secretary had to hold a Party meeting to bolster their morale and reconsolidate their stand — this took at least 7 days, including the time it took to prepare for the meeting. After the morale of the cadres was bolstered they went out to try to and bolster the morale of the people.

Seven days! And this step was only the first needed to repair the damage. If a second sweep followed hard upon the first, and a third upon the second, the Front position in the village was in danger of falling apart completely. (16)

Here as elsewhere, we can see how the NLF was forced to operate within the limits of its own situation. Taking such pains with Party morale was an agonizingly slow process, but, however time consuming, it still promised better results than more hasty methods. The materials out of which a strategy had to be constructed were human beings, some more resolute than others, but all subject to the normal emotions of fear, panic and despair. An immediate response to US-GVN inflicted disasters was impossible because people have only limited inner resources. It would take time to gather the most dedicated cadres, to encourage them to pull themselves together, to help them gain once more a sense of initiative and confidence. And it was just as certain that the same process of rebuilding would take even longer with the other villagers, and that the morale of the peasants could never be restored without the good example of their bolder neighbors. Thus U.S. escalation, with its largely technological and inhuman means of destruction, forced the NLF to draw more and more deeply on the inner resources of cadres and people.

"WHO WILL WE WORK WITH,
WHO WILL WE LIVE WITH?"

Escalation completely changed the lives of NLF cadres. In the first place, simply staying in touch with the villagers was now a major problem. A respondent noted that

Because of intensive shelling, the cadres dared not gather the people in meetings for a time. They had to call on every villager to explain to them what they had to do. Even when they waged face-to-face struggles, they had to call on every family to urge them to go on demonstrations.

In some villages, the cadres divided hamlets into "sectors," and sectors into "sub-sectors," each containing five families. Individual cadres then took responsibility for carrying on political work in one sub-sector at a time. Business previously dispatched in one large village meeting now required a considerable number of small ones. "This has made the NLF cadres busier than before," remarked one observer, no doubt with some understatement. Trying to mobilize people individually or in small groups would be more difficult than appealing to them in large crowds, where each listener could feel the potential strength of the mass simply by looking around. So in addition to the fact that there were a greater number of meetings for cadres to attend, the work of persuasion itself was probably more difficult than before.

Local cadres also had to undertake a growing volume of physical work. Earlier, the three associations organized labor teams to dig trenches, transport ammunition, or carry wounded fighters to medical centers, but as these organizations disbanded, cadres "had to grab everyone they came across," or else do the work themselves. They "were angry at having to do the labor which they had been exonerated from previously," according to this respondent.

Many a time, we reported our dissatisfaction to

the village chapter, but what it replied to us was to say that we had to make more efforts to endure it. Since the beginning of this year, I had to carry out these labor jobs almost all the time.

In addition, villages could no longer afford to maintain special funds to support NLF personnel, so its members were compelled to adopt a policy of self-sufficiency. They took part time jobs, either cultivating lands held from the Village Committee, or delegating some of their members to do hired labor around the village. As one cadre put it, "All of the members of the group took turns earning money"; they busied themselves "catching fish or getting firewood," in order to support their comrades.

These measures were politically necessary. According to a cadre,

In order to be able to wage a long war and lighten the burden of contributions for the poverty-stricken people who have been suffering for a long time because of the war, the Front has decided that each fighter would have to try his best to provide for his needs from one to four months, depending on the nature of his missions and the circumstances. By helping the Front cut down the people's contributions to the war efforts, fighters prove that they are grateful to the people.

As the villagers' ability to contribute to the Front went down, cadres had to take up the slack. A small respite for all the peasants meant substantially increased work loads for each of the cadres in the village. Not only did peasants stop working for the NLF, in some hamlets, the Front began to work for the peasants. A respondent provided the following explanation for this development :

We had to carry out the civilian proselyting task, that is to work for the people in taking care of their orchards or in dredging the ditches. At present, there is not much manpower left in (the village) and our help is much appreciated.

The fact that casualties and defections were simultaneously creating a shortage of experienced officials compounded such difficulties. Increasingly, cadres were forced to do the work of two or three people at the same time.

While struggling with all these obligations, cadres were also expected to support their families. In some ways, they were even worse off in this respect than the other villagers.

Those who didn't work for the Front were better off than those who did, because they could spend all their time tilling their land. The revolutionaries just got poorer and poorer, and their families didn't enjoy any benefits at all. On the contrary, they had to pay higher taxes to the Front than the common people, because they were told that they had to set the good example for the rest of the villagers.

After years of sacrifice, "The revolutionaries just got poorer and poorer." The interview transcripts eloquently testify to the despair of many cadres as they watched their families becoming increasingly miserable, with parents and young children unable to provide for themselves, huddled in shelters, without enough food to eat.

Even more sobering for cadres was the departure of the refugees. At first convinced that it could hold village communities together in spite of bombing and shelling, the Front had by 1967 reluctantly come to accept the evacuation of many villagers from their homes. When U. S. escalation was just gathering momentum, cadres had sternly prevented peasants from fleeing the bombs and shells, and had threatened to confiscate the land of those who did succeed in leaving the village. At the same time, projects were organized to dig trenches and shelters. According to one account, it was impossible to make people "ignore the fear of shelling," but at least with shelters the peasants felt "less depressed" and temporarily set aside thoughts "of leaving their villages for the town."

But as bombing and shelling went on for month after month, year after year, cadres lost control of the situation.

A respondent explained.

The people were told that if they moved into the Strategic Hamlet, they would not have land to work on, they would lose their freedom, and they would live in virtual confinement, and that they should live in the liberated area to have land to work on and to till that land in togetherness with other people. Political indoctrination against moving into the Strategic Hamlet was successful at the beginning, because the people tended to cling to their land and therefore few would move into the Strategic Hamlet. But when they began to be harrassed by bombs and bullets and the fear of death, nothing could deter them from leaving any more.

The United States had resolved that peasants should not be allowed "to till the land in togetherness with other people," and as time passed it became clear that the NLF had no effective means of reassuring villagers who were being "harrassed by bombs and bullets and the fear of death."

As refugees continued to leave the village, cadres were heard to sponsor tactics they originally had scorned. For example, in 1965 they attempted to prevent peasants from building huts in the ricefields, but now the construction of such mákeshift dwellings was encouraged in order "to reduce the present atmosphere of sadness and desolation in the liberated zone." The confiscation policy was also modified, so that those who resolved to depart were no longer threatened with the loss of their lands, "The VC wanted to keep the land of those who had left in order to use it as bait to lure them to come back to their hamlet," explained an interviewee.

For the first time in its history, the NLF had been unable to persuade a significant number of people to follow its "line and policy." As they attempted to counter U.S. escalation, cadres came back again and again to the same problem. A POW noted :

The present war fought by the NLF is a people's war. The people are considered its main power.

If all the people flee, the NLF armed forces can have nobody to support and strengthen them. Therefore I realize that the more the people leave the village, the more the armed units of the district and village will be weakened.

Departure of the refugees and the subsequent decline of the popular associations were devastating blows to cadres who were quite unused to a political defeat of this magnitude. A defector stated that :

This situation made all of us feel more and more isolated from the people. We can't help feeling this, because all of us have been intensively indoctrinated that the Party is like a human body whose legs and arms are the popular associations. Now, without legs and arms, how could a human body survive? We were also told that the Party represents the enlightened leadership, while the people are the ones who carry out the policies. Now, without the people's help, how could the policies be implemented ?

Cadres felt lonely and exposed. "Without the people, life was very dull and sad," remarked a defector from a village which had been considerably emptied by bombing and shelling. Another remembered the mournful reflections of a comrade: "We have to convince the villagers not to leave the village and this must be the primary goal because if they leave us, who will we work with, who will we live with?"

Deprived of communal support, cadres were completely out of their element. One defector explained that

In the cadres' eyes, the loss of the people's support is always the worst thing, because all of them know well that every cadre had to rely on the people's support for his own security and for turning in a good performance. They are convinced that they never could accomplish their assignments if

they cannot get the people's support. Not only did they have to rely on the people to safeguard their own lives. When they lived surrounded by the people, they felt much more reassured. Not because the people were very eager to inform them of the arrival of GVN forces — very few people did — but because whenever GVN soldiers came into their hamlets, those villagers who had their sons and their relatives working for the Front always rushed to advise them to flee. Therefore, the village cadres always knew of the danger in time and succeeded in fleeing. That's what the cadres understood by the common saying that the people are like water and the cadres are like fish. Without water, the fish cannot survive.

The dictum about fish in water was as much a "common saying" in the corridors of the Pentagon as it was among the villagers. According to the testimony of the "fish" themselves, U.S. bombing and shelling was doing its job.

Over the years, sharing common dangers and common hopes had created a profound solidarity among local cadres. Seeing dear friends killed and the long-sought victory receding was almost too much for many to bear. They gathered together and talked in somber tones of the future.

Some of them said that in 1967 it was going to be a life and death struggle, and that the risk of their getting killed would be greater. Some said: "I am looking at your face today, but tomorrow we might never see each other again." That was all they said. They all seemed very confused and demoralized.

For years, these cadres had looked forward to the day when they would capture My Tho City, when they would cut once and for all Route 4, "The Indochina Road," which bisects the Province and serves as a lifeline between Saigon and the lower Delta. Now, as one discouraged cadre put it,

The villagers have all left the village and moved out there to make their living. The village is large, but there are only a few of us cadres living here, so how are we going to expand the movement? It's certain that from now on until we die we won't see My Tho or the Indochina Road.

Some cadres became so demoralized that they plunged into a frenzied hedonism. For example, one respondent belonged to a local Party faction which "took joy and consolation in liquor to forget the times when we had to work hard." This Chapter was regularly disrupted by bitter disputes between these drinkers and the "zealots" who clung to the austere mode of life the Front had always recommended.

Multiplying failures prompted an increasing number of cadres to defect to the other side. Saigon's "Chieu Hoi" ("Open Arms") program did not compete effectively with the Front for the allegiance of NLF cadres, and so long as the insurgency was making good progress, it had little to fear from defections. (17) But in villages where the Front was on the defensive, where local cadres were losing their morale and perhaps beginning to quarrel among themselves, the Chieu Hoi program could wreak havoc. The desertion of just one cadre always threatened to touch off a chain reaction which could prove very difficult to bring under control. After a defection, all local offices and supplies had to be shifted to new hiding places, a respondent explained, "for fear that the rallier might inform the government about their location and lead them there to destroy their bases." Meanwhile, close friends of the defector were now left alone with their own thoughts. As one defector surmised:

Such a radical shift coming from a district committee member must have raised a lot of questions in the cadres' and villagers' minds. They couldn't help guessing that I must have some good reasons to do so. They would certainly try to discover the motives for my shift, but first, they must have thought of their own cases and their endeavors to

stand hardships and privations. Unavoidably, they must have questioned themselves about their own future. From thought association, they would have wondered whether or not there would be any profit for them in continuing to serve the Front, since a cadre like myself has to abandon it half-way.

And indeed, the interviews show that some defectors resolved to change sides after hearing about the flight of other cadres they had known.

While thinking such thoughts, local officials were also surveying all the other cadres and wondering if they too were contemplating desertion. In this poisonous atmosphere, the very realization that one was for the first time an object of suspicion was sometimes enough to catalyze long-standing grievances. A respondent described the following situation after his cousin had defected :

I thought I had worked for the Front for a long time, and that it must be well aware of my revolutionary standpoint. But I couldn't help thinking over (my cousin's) behavior. I told myself that since (he) has a larger comprehension than mine, he might have had a good reason to act the way he did.

In this way, defections tested the solidarity of local Front organizations. Only the most cohesive would be able to pull together after such betrayal and succeed in rebuilding mutual trust.

Defections did their most serious damage in the area of relations between cadres and villagers. Here are the thoughts of one defector on this matter.

In the Front areas, the cadres very often don't have enough to eat, and they usually go to the houses of the people to ask for help and food. When a cadre rallied and the GVN conducted an operation in the village about two weeks later, the people believed that it was the rallier himself who had

guided the GVN troops into the village to arrest the people and seize their paddy. They hated the rallier a lot, and as a result, they opposed the cadres who were still in the Front whenever the latter came to see them to ask for help. They told the cadres: "You ask for our help, but when you rally and surrender to the enemy, you will denounce us to the GVN so they can come and make a mess of our house. If we help you, it will be like 'raising wasps in one's sleeves.' We've paid all our taxes, and we don't have anything left to give you." What a humiliation for the cadres!

This "humiliation," along with the other problems cited, made defections a political problem for the Front. "Each time a cadre rallied," affirmed a female respondent, "confusion reigned and control couldn't be maintained as tightly as before. It took the Front at least two months to reconsolidate its ranks and bring things back to a normal level. Every time a cadre rallied, the movement went way down hill." Added to all their other worries, defections from within their own ranks increased the strain on already hard-pressed militants.

Representatives of a movement which seemed to be losing the war, cadres suffered a decline in personal influence and prestige. Formerly, they had moved around in the open, immune to GVN armed intervention, but in 1967, according to one observer, "They have to hide most of the time in the secret trenches. They are no longer free to talk loudly in front of the mass, or to travel to and fro to carry out their missions. Self defense becomes important to the cadres, and their missions only came second." Activities were constantly interrupted by bombing, shelling and sweeps. At such times, cadres ran for their lives, flinging themselves into damp trenches six or seven times a day, or taking refuge in underground hideouts where some died of asphyxiation, or seeking concealment in the chilly waters of a nearby canal until they almost froze.

Attitudes toward the cadres changed now that "the Front no longer could protect (the people's) lives and property."

As one defector observed :

The cadres have lost their prestige in the eyes of the people, because the people have seen that the cadres are much more afraid of the commandoes than they are. At present, the cadres no longer stand up majestuously and bravely in front of the people during meetings to bolster their morale after each GVN operation in the village, as they used to do in the previous years.

Another defector stated that villagers once "looked up to (the cadres) as national heroes who dared to sacrifice themselves for the people." But now

When the war came to the area, the Front's secure base was attacked, the cadres' prestige decreased a great deal. Whenever there was a military operation or an air and artillery attack, the cadres always ran away very quickly and ahead of the villagers. They were the last to return to the village. The villagers realized that the cadres were no better than themselves.

A history of dramatic successes had invested the Front with a special aura, and its cadres commanded respect at least in part because they seemed so sure of themselves and of their movement. But now, as villagers saw that the cadres "were no better than themselves," this aura was stripped away. Once proud leaders could no longer hold the attention of their frightened constituents. Those who participated so enthusiastically when the Front was winning now hesitated as the tide of events began to run against the insurgents.

THE "FANATICS" STAND FIRM

With one defector after another cataloguing the Front's mounting difficulties, interview transcripts for 1967 make

grim reading. In their shared misery, cadres and peasants always seem to be either quarreling or eyeing each other with sullen mistrust, and the NLF as a whole appears helpless to resolve the massive problems created by U. S. escalation. But in reading further, we become aware of underlying trends which create a somewhat different, less gloomy impression. The situation is indeed very desperate, but the futility of the NLF is more apparent than real. Beyond the panic and disillusionment of many cadres, we begin to perceive that the organization as a whole maintains a certain cohesion. Badly disrupted, its basic method of operation remains intact in spite of the numerous obstacles thrown up by the war.

The disputes between peasants and cadres during this period have a very distinctive tone. Here is a typical example, a tax collector arguing with one of his neighbors.

I, myself, cannot keep body and soul together and do not know what to tell you about the taxation. My job is to force you to pay; however, I know perfectly that your income is low, while the taxation is too high. I have to do what I am told and I assure you it is not because I want to do so for my own prestige. I am also a taxpayer like you. Therefore, I hope you understand the position I am in.

Unmollified, the peasant "grilled" his interlocutor. "You're a native of the village," he answered, "you are also a farmer, and consequently, you know perfectly well about the crop this year. Do you think that the people can get enough money to pay such taxes?"

When faced with such questions, the tax collector was at a loss and didn't know how to reply, but begged for the villagers' sympathy: "Please, try to understand my position and try to pay your taxes to feed the fighters in order to help them fight harder for an earlier victory."

Escalation has turned this relationship upside-down, with

the official now in the role of suppliant, while the villager adopts an obdurate, interrogating stance. The cadre is long past the point of threatening or browbeating delinquent taxpayers. Economic problems in the village are so manifest that he cannot plausibly attribute the peasant's stubbornness to ill will or bad politics. All he can do is to plead humbly for sympathy and cooperation. On the other side, the villager voices his criticisms freely. He is deeply exasperated with the NLF, but he does not seem to fear it as he would an arbitrary or dictatorial government bent on using brute force to win compliance with its wishes.

An unmistakable complicity, based on the shared experience of living in the same hamlet and working the same land, binds these two people together. The cadre gets a hearing because he is "also a taxpayer," a "native of the village," a man like his neighbors and not someone with a special stake in his own "prestige." At the same time, his willingness to persist with his assignment serves in some way to make a political point. Tempted to present himself as a low-level official who has to "do what he is told," he nonetheless manages in the end to steer the discussion back to the main point: that taxes must be paid, "to feed the fighters in order to help them fight harder for an earlier victory." For his part, the peasant does not turn his back on this importuning official. Indignant, even bitter, he is, almost in spite of himself, drawn into the debate. Molded by the give-and-take of many past study sessions, he somehow cannot find it within himself to refuse to discuss even this latest, apparently unconscionable demand.

If peasants simply refused to pay, we can assume that the tax collector returned soon afterward to broach the matter once again. The interviews present us with a picture of local cadres who in 1967 often did not get anyone to follow instructions, or even to respond to their appeals save with hostile silence or bitter invective. But in spite of setbacks, most cadres did not give up their work of persuasion. With an almost pedantic stubbornness, they clung to practices which from the beginning had given the Front its distinctive political character. For example, though it was by this time apparent that refugees were not going to return to their

villages until bombing and shelling ceased, many interviews indicate that local Front representatives continued to talk whenever possible with the transplanted peasants. "Every day I came to these seven empty houses," remembered one respondent, "to wait for the house owners who might return for gathering crops or wood. I would talk to them, urging them to come back and relay the message to other refugees."

Whatever else happened, the face-to-face aspect of Front procedure was maintained. In the difficult circumstances of 1967, several cadres were reprimanded for their reliance on written instructions. When meetings were dangerous, and discussion usually unproductive, local cadres may have been tempted simply to circulate memos or to publicize orders on a poster in the center of the village. But such practices were quickly criticized. In a society where many were illiterate and others read only with the greatest difficulty, written orders were almost by definition an authoritarian device, since few of the villagers were comfortable enough with reading to be fully persuaded by arguments presented in written form. Cadres were to continue with the old method, and to bring personally to each peasant the requests of the NLF.

"The higher authorities have always encouraged the village cadres to be patient, to stay close to the people, to get them to attend meetings," remembered one defector. Cadres should never "detach themselves from the people," another explained, because in that case, they would "no longer understand the people's problems. Being unacquainted with their problems, the cadres failed in persuading them and consequently, had to resort to out and out orders to carry out their assignments." As we read the transcripts, we see that these down-to-earth instructions mean just what they say, the admonitions are intended to be taken literally: good cadres do not detach themselves from the people, they stay close in an immediate, physical way. Maintaining this closeness was important because the task of explaining, of asking for criticism and attempting to promote discussion, was the essence of the Front's method, even when audiences were small and the response negative. "The Front cadres didn't mind how much time they had to

spend on indoctrinating someone," stated a female defector, "and they would do it until the person became self-enlightened." By persisting with this commitment, even when peasants seemed unresponsive, the NLF was in effect saying to people that it was sure its line was right, it knew peasants could not be forced to fight a guerrilla war, but in the meantime it had confidence in the villagers' ability, sooner or later, to analyze the situation, to become "self-enlightened," and to respond to the appeals which were so methodically being repeated. The Front was demonstrating its permanence, not just in an impersonal, bureaucratic sense, but also in terms of its loyalty to a particular style of political activity in which a large role would always be reserved for "the people's will."

To back up this commitment, the NLF gradually modified its ambitious draft and tax policies, which had been established in the 1964-1965 period. Since the insurgents necessarily relied on villagers for money, rice and labor power, compromise was possible only within limits, but the transcripts do show unmistakably that the Front responded to U.S. escalation in part by easing the burden on its beleaguered rural constituency. For example, with American troops pouring into Vietnam by the tens of thousands, cadres in My Tho phased out the NLF draft program — an astonishing step for a political movement to take in the midst of a war which was calling into question its very existence. Recruiters were told that they had to rely entirely on persuasion, and to be content with volunteers, and, as a result, in some villages there were no new recruits at all in 1966 and 1967. (18)

The tax system was also modified, by permitting villagers to pay in installments, to claim more deductions, and by allowing them to bargain individually and collectively with assessors. Here is a POW's report on NLF tax collecting on one district:

This year the Front intends to collect 1,800,000 piasters in taxes, but as of May (1966) it has succeeded in collecting only 700,000 piasters. My guess is that the most the Front could collect this

year is 800,000 piasters because during many heated meetings the cadres had had to either reduce the amount of taxes for many villagers or exempt many of the villagers from tax payment. This year, the villagers have had to attend six indoctrination sessions so far. The Front only started collecting taxes after the people understood this problem and no longer had any questions in mind.

Thus, at a time when the United States was raising annual expenditure on the war up to the \$30 billion level, the Front grudgingly consented to decreases in its own tax revenues.

The NLF did not discontinue compulsory military service and lower taxes because it suddenly realized in some abstract way that such compromises were morally appropriate. All accounts make clear that cadres implacably pushed the peasants very hard, and that "many heated meetings" were needed to force reductions in their demands. In any case, the peasants' obligations were still painfully high, even with Front concessions taken into account. Nonetheless, modest as they were, these steps required great political courage. Cadres knew perfectly well that the Front armies were suffering high casualties and critical shortages of basic supplies. For months, they had told peasants that enlisting in the army and paying big tax bills were vital to the survival of the resistance. The temptation must have been very strong to cling to a hard line and hope for the best, especially since the concessions demanded by the villagers threatened to compromise the Front's military position at a time when U.S. escalation showed no signs of slowing down. The Front accepted these dangers and modified draft and tax policies because it saw that the greatest of all pitfalls was the irrevocable loss of popular support. Faced with an agonizing choice, NLF leaders had the clarity and the conviction to hold on to a central insight: the war could not be carried on long in the face of concerted opposition from the peasants.

Much more was involved here than some glib or abstract notion of "winning popular support." In 1967 more than ever before, the Front's ability to keep in touch with its own

constituency depended on the steadiness and humanity of its local officials. Cadres had to maintain a delicate position: to require contributions from the peasants which were generous enough to keep the NLF alive, but not so great that they drove people over the edge into outright opposition. We have seen examples of cadres who could not cope with this complex political situation. Unused to the lack of responsiveness they found among the villagers, and convinced that their future and the future of the NLF were at stake, such officials "screamed at" the peasants when the latter refused to cooperate, "they behaved exactly like the mandarins." This loss of self-control only made matters worse in that it "isolated them further from the people." Others became convinced that the Front was being defeated. Their perfunctory appeals were ignored by the villagers, and a number of them defected to the other side.

What sustained the NLF was the inner strength and moral authority of those cadres who persisted with their old routines, making the rounds to "motivate the people" in spite of all the obstacles they encountered. These officials stayed close to the peasants though the latter no longer held them in awe and did not respond enthusiastically to their appeals. They remained loyal to a mode of operation based on persuasion when lack of response made this method appear ineffectual and even foolish. Refusing to be provoked when peasants boldly declined to consider their requests, they patiently continued to present the point of view of the NLF. Most of all, they maintained a sense of confidence during the bad times in 1967 after the Front had lost considerable ground and had been forced to change tax and draft policies which it once had uncompromisingly insisted were vital to its own survival. While some peasants jumped to the conclusion that the movement was falling apart, they continued to affirm that in spite of everything the NLF would win in the end. The Front owed everything to these cadres who did not panic, even when the resistance endeavor seemed to be collapsing all around them.

The ability of many cadres "to stay close to the people" saved the NLF. The Front had staked everything on its assertion that the people of the countryside had no choice but armed resistance. At the same time, its leaders knew that

all peasants in every hamlet were not likely to recognize and act on this conclusion at the same time. For each villager, the war was an ebb and flow, an endless series of inconveniences, of regular brushes with disaster, and, sooner or later, of stunning personal tragedy. Peasants who were exasperated by frequent labor details and bitter over high taxes would suddenly be shocked into a rage by the death of a loved one or the loss of their crops. Cadres had to be close by throughout this process, to bear with the irritation and the criticism so that when the moment came, when peasants were ready to fight back, there would be a way for them to make contact with the NLF.

The transcripts contain several illustrations of this "repression-resistance spiral." (19) A woman POW remembered that

it was difficult to wage face-to-face struggles. The people were afraid and they did not want to go on demonstrations. But in the last months before I was arrested, the people sustained excessive damage and this stirred them up to such an extent that they couldn't care less about being arrested. Back then, they wanted to meet with the District Chief to ask him to stop shelling their village. Many villagers wept profusely when they saw their harvests wiped out. In June, July and August 1965, about 20 hectares of paddy were damaged.

The Saigon regime itself often inadvertently pushed villagers into the ranks of the NLF. "Many times, the GVN soldiers arrested, jailed and beat up innocent people whom they accused of being VC," noted a respondent.

So the innocent people who had been arrested and beaten up all said: "We're not VC, and yet we have been arrested and accused of being VC. It would be better, then, for us to become VC." The VC took advantage of the situation to make propaganda. They told the men that whether they worked for the revolution or not, they would be arrested, jailed

and beaten up by the enemy, and that, therefore, they had better join the Front to help fight against the enemy.

The parents of another interviewee had been killed by GVN artillery. A cadre said to him: "Why don't you do something to avenge your parents' death? You have to do something, you will be killed anyway even if you do nothing against the GVN." The Front could not force people to accept this perception. Its cadres were schooled to be patient, to hold out the option of resistance until the war itself persuaded peasants that they had no choice but to join the NLF.

When the Front was forced out of an area, the GVN might be tempted to rebuild its own local presence. But as soon as the balance of forces tipped in its favor, the people would be exposed to the full weight of Saigon dictatorship. Peasants who had been complaining about NLF taxes and labor duties were then face to face with a qualitatively different kind of political authority. In 1967, when the Front seemed weaker than ever before, the rigorous logic of this "repression-resistance spiral" kept the movement alive. For example, one respondent described "the recent enlistment movement of the youths" which took place in that year.

During previous years, that is, in 1963, 1964 and 1965, volunteers for the Front's armed forces were very scarce. There were, at most, about ten volunteers every year. In 1966, despite tremendous mobilizing efforts, none of the youths agreed to join the Front. But this year, while the Front had stopped waging propaganda in favor of its conscription policy, the youths took the initiative on their own to volunteer. This was the consequence of the ill-treatment they had received from the ARVN soldiers. Among the volunteers, there were those who were fathers of two or three children.

"The recent enlistment movement of the youths" was not an entirely spontaneous development. Much apparently unfruitful work had created a political climate in which angry young people were able to join the Front. We should not overlook the many study sessions of 1963-1965 when re-

cruits "were very scarce," or the campaigns of 1966 when, "despite tremendous mobilizing efforts, none of the youths agreed to join the Front."

The repression-resistance spiral benefitted the NLF because its organizational core outlasted U.S. escalation. Bombing and shelling demolished schools and hospitals and broke up the popular associations. It drove people out of the countryside, killed many villagers and coerced others into defecting to the GVN. But with a nucleus of dedicated cadres standing firm, two key institutions managed to hold together: the Party and the armed forces. Communist organization not only endured, in some respects it became even more rigorous and painstaking in its operations. For example, one POW noted that in spite of mounting recruitment difficulties, the Party was tightening procedures for inducting new members. "The reason is that careless admission of people to the Party will cause much harm to the Party itself," he explained, "especially when the war is getting more and more atrocious. Party members without character and conviction can't put up with hardships and may surrender to the enemy easily." At the same time, the regime of stringent criticism among local cadres was toned down. A defector observed that

When the village didn't obtain the desired results, the district sent a cadre down to criticize the Party Secretary, then the Party Secretary criticized all the Party members in the village. But now, there was less emphasis on criticism and more emphasis on indoctrination. Starting in the middle of 1966 the cadres were indoctrinated more than before to consolidate their morale. In order to do so, we were told about the situation in the region and about the victories won by the Front all over the country — the victories won in the Center, in the region and in the various villages in the province and so on.

Every precaution was taken to preserve local personnel. As a POW put it in late 1967, "If the war gets more and more atrocious, the Party will go underground even in 'lib-

erated areas' in order to safeguard its members. Party members are a precious capital for the Party." The survival of this "precious capital" cannot be overstressed. So long as there were villagers still anxious to fight, the Party provided them with a framework within which to carry on the struggle.

To the cadres who stuck with the Front, the situation in 1967 looked like this. Imagine a village in which a few peasants and cadres continued to cling to their homes and orchards, and to carry on as best they could the activities of the NLF. Around them, in concentric circles, were the refugees. The first group was scattered across the rice-fields living in makeshift huts. Others clustered in temporary dwellings along nearby highways and canals, in new life hamlets, or next to GVN military posts in the area. In the outer circle, refugees in district towns, My Tho and Saigon tried to adjust to urban life.

A few of the refugees had given up hope of returning home and were resolved to make the best of their new lives. But most of the displaced people still thought of the village, tried to visit as often as possible, and looked forward to the day when circumstances would allow them to go back to their native places. Some refugees "buried their belongings or entrusted them to their acquaintances" before setting out. Many times, a family would leave one member behind to watch over the land. Others might be content to send a representative back periodically "in order to gather wood, fruit, or to catch fish." Still others, gone for months, reappeared during the "farming season" to lay down a new crop, or at the Tet holiday to visit with relatives and old friends. "Living integrated with the enemy" facilitated this process. The refugee could find relative security in a new life hamlet or even in a district town which need not be more than a few miles from home. The departure was traumatic for many, but in terms of physical space, they were in a position to return quickly to their homes if circumstances permitted.

The attention of these refugees was drawn to the small group which continued to occupy the original village site. To some observers, these survivors seemed pitiful indeed. A defector noted that :

At present, houses are all dismantled, weeds grow everywhere, the inhabitants are living an unstable life hiding themselves in ricefields all day long. They are unable to work to earn their living. Their jobs have become more difficult, also, they could be killed or wounded by mines and booby-traps which are planted throughout the village. Almost all the people have left the village and those who remain are poverty-stricken beyond your imagination.

The impressions of another defector were equally bleak.

Those who stayed in the liberated areas — either because of family reasons, or because they couldn't earn their living elsewhere, or because they were fanatic Front followers — are now living like "people who have lost their spirits" — they are frightened and haggard: they live in hiding to avoid bombing and shelling, and then when there is no bombing and shelling they have to slave to earn enough to live from day to day. I didn't expect to find the situation so different after living four years away from home and from the people. My family reached the bottom of poverty and the liberated areas were in ruins and deserted — there were only a few people left. They were scattered in the village, and lived in shelters, and their ricefields and orchards were destroyed.

Other accounts convey a similar impression: a handful of "fanatic" NLF cadres and their relatives, a few poor peasants clinging to their lands, a remnant of the thriving communities in which the Front had taken root only a few years before.

Those who stayed were not shell-shocked peasants who did not know any better. The men and women who had entrenched themselves in their homes were very special people. According to a defector,

There are a very small number of cadres who are still remaining in the village or in higher headquarters to carry out their activities. Perhaps it is they are high ranking cadres and they have such absolute confidence in the NLF that they have become fanatics with high morale and an everlasting endurance of hardships. They are very aggressive to carry out NLF activities, awaiting a final victory.

The Front had been weakened, but not defeated. Bombing and shelling had driven many people away from their hamlets, but with some "very aggressive" local cadres still carrying out NLF activities and "awaiting a final victory," escalation had not gained the strategic objective which it had been intended to achieve.

The Front presence in the villages was not just symbolic. In the first place, local organization, even when reduced to skeletal form, was of considerable importance to the regular armed forces of the Front. By 1967, NLF Main and Local Force battalions were finding it increasingly difficult to move around in the countryside, to find food, shelter, and support services among the peasants. But so long as some sort of village organization remained, these units were able to function in the classic guerrilla manner, without being compelled to undertake a strategy of complete self-sufficiency and independence from the civilian population. By enabling these regular units to stay in touch with the peasants, even in a marginal way, local cadres helped to keep alive their potential striking power — as the Tet Offensive of the next year was to demonstrate.

The tenacity of cadres and backbone elements was important in another respect as well. Bombing and shelling could drive away the people and disorganize the popular associations in a village. Once proud institutions enrolling hundreds of peasants were effectively reduced to a handful of cadres operating more or less in a political void. But so long as this handful remained, the possibility of rebuilding the associations was still alive. As one respondent put it, "In case the hostilities calm down, it will be easy for the Front to reorganize them." US-GVN authorities could bomb

and shell for years at a time, but if they did not succeed in wiping out the core of NLF strength, they had not gained a lasting advantage over the insurgents. As soon as the bombardment stopped, the refugees, who, as we have seen, were for the most part eagerly awaiting just such an eventuality, would stream back to their villages. In that case, cadres would begin once again to build up their "infrastructure," and within a matter of time the Front would once more have the countryside fully mobilized.

If bombing and shelling had completely emptied a significant number of villages, if the hard core of NLF strength in many communities had been pulverized once and for all, the Americans would have won the war. By their persistence, these revolutionaries demonstrated that US-GVN firepower could damage but could not break the bond between the peasants and their land. If even the "fanatics," with their "high morale and an everlasting endurance of hardships," had given up and left home, thoughts of someday returning might have died out among the refugees. The effect of such a loss of hope on morale throughout the countryside would certainly have been very damaging to the cohesion of Vietnamese society. By standing fast, cadres and peasants kept alive, both for themselves and for the refugees who had departed, the reality of a community living in the midst of its own orchards and fields.

A VANGUARD OF POOR PEASANTS

American escalation rested on assumptions which seemed plausible enough. Amidst the bombing and shelling, with homes and fields in ruins and villages emptied of peasants, with the ranks of the NLF split by defections and its method of operations sabotaged in a thousand ways, surely the insurgents would lose faith in the Front and gradually give up the struggle. But the cadres did not give up. In spite of disappointments and failures, they persisted with their activities and thereby prevented the United States from winning the war. Difficult as it is to explain such intangibles, we must try to account for this stubborn determination. When the American onslaught forced them to make a cruel per-

sonal choice, why did so many cadres resolve to keep on fighting ?

Remarks from one of the defectors help us come to grips with this question. The interviewee, a very poor peasant, was asked to describe the local cadres he used to work with :

They were all poor people in the village. They were greatly dissatisfied with the GVN administration during the 6 years of peace (1954-1960). They had met with difficulties every time they had contact with the village authorities who had always make light of them and never assisted them. That was why, when the Liberation Front rose up, they joined the Front to struggle against the village authorities.

Poverty thus partially explained the commitment of these insurgents. At the same time, their lowly background was a positive asset in the work the Front asked them to do.

These cadres had many experiences in the class struggle's political activities. Since they belonged to the poor class, they had known many hard experiences of the underprivileged rural people. So they based their political activities on the common thinking of the peasants and adopted methods suitable to the rural people's thought and situation in carrying out these activities. That explained why they enjoyed the sympathy and confidence of the peasants.

Service in the NLF remade these poor peasants. "Enticed by the Party with its proletariat doctrine," they "acted with their proletarian spirit and not with the thought of a sentimental people. They had lost all sentiment towards their friends, parents and relatives. They only knew the Party and adopted the Communist spirit in all their activities." Within the Front, they performed feats one might not have expected of men and women from the most oppressed strata of the population :

On the question whether (the village party committee secretary) deserved to assume this position, I may say that he was not qualified to assume such an important position. This was because he had the same low level of education as any other poor peasant. He had never learned any working methods, any laws. In spite of this, he was entrusted with the position and he succeeded in fulfilling his task because there were other members in the village Party committee who contributed their ideas and suggestions on every problem. Thanks to this close cooperation among Party committee members, who met and discussed carefully every problem, the Party secretary could satisfactorily perform his duties. Besides, his enthusiasm and positive effort in every task entrusted to him by his superiors, his devotion to the service of the Party were also reasons why he could assume the most important Party position in the village.

With his "low level of education," and without having "learned any working methods, and laws," this peasant managed to function effectively for the Front. In "close cooperation" with likeminded cadres, carefully discussing every issue, and bound to comrades by a shared "devotion to the service of the Party," he "succeeded in fulfilling his task."

The Front was an organization primarily of the rural poor. Several witnesses indicate that the Farmers', Women's, and Youth's Associations were reserved for very poor, poor and middle peasants, and the Party gave preferential treatment to these same groups. In recruitment, a respondent explained, "emphasis is put on youth and the right class (i.e., middle farmers, poor farmers, very poor farmers, workers and the poor people in the cities)." Rich farmers and landlords were usually not admitted. The recruits themselves were aware of this situation, and indeed at times seem to have been somewhat bemused by the odd preferences of the Front, which contrasted so sharply with the traditional hierarchy of the countryside. As a defector put it,

The Party also takes into consideration the capacity and moral behavior of the member so appointed, but his social class origin was the most important factor: it pays most attention to poor farmers like me; the reason that I have advanced so fast is that I am a poor farmer.

In this very concrete way, the Front gambled its whole existence on a certain kind of class analysis: it would stand or fall with the poor peasants who made up the greater part of its rank and file.

The NLF appealed to peasants to rise up and fight for their rights. One defector stated:

I was told by the Front cadres (before I joined) that the Front was fighting to give rights and material benefits to the poor people, and to liberate the people. I was told that the Front was fighting against the landlords and the feudalists to bring rights and material benefits to the poor class.

"You are a very poor farmer," another defector remembered being told; "therefore you have to take part in the present struggle which aims at liberating the country and safeguarding the interests of yourself and of your class." A third respondent related how a cadre

called on me and persuaded me to join the Front. He said that I was poor because, like the other poor, I had been exploited by the GVN which only defended the landowners and the capitalists and allowed them to exploit the poor. (The cadre) also accused the GVN of allowing its soldiers to rob the people, thus causing a lot of suffering to the villagers. He boasted that the Front, sympathizing with the people's hardships, couldn't help rising up to overthrow Ngo Dinh Diem in order to liberate the country. At that time, I thought that (the cadre) was right and that everything he said was very logical. I guess I thought so because I was poor. I agreed to follow him and to join the Front.

NLF strategy depended on peasants seeing the "logic" of a policy which put the most despised group in society suddenly into a vanguard role.

To get results, the Front had to undermine ideological justifications of poverty and persuade powerless villagers that they did in fact have the means to assert themselves. A defector, who was suspicious of the Front because it "didn't care about religions," remembered how cadres

Often stated that there wasn't any spiritual power and that human beings are their own bosses. They said: "There isn't any power superior to human beings. Human beings can decide on everything. In this war, for instance, it's quite useless to pray either to Jesus or Buddha with a view of winning the war. They cannot do us any good. But if we are determined to fight, we will win." Such statements were repeated very often and although I didn't like them at all, I couldn't help feeling they sounded rather right.



Villagers Assemble to Confront the Enemy

There was nothing inevitable about poverty, the people were told. "You are poor because you live under an unjust system," insisted a cadre to his peasant audience. An espe-

cially pointed critique was directed against religious doctrines of poverty. Here is the account of a female defector :

Before, the bourgeois and the rich used to say that the poor were those that were not blessed by heaven. But when the Front came, the cadres told the people that this was not so, and that the people were poor because they didn't have land to till, and that the well-off farmers were rich because they had land to till. The cadres said their economic conditions weren't due to heavens' blessings or the lack of it. The people understood that heaven had nothing to do with their life and they stopped going to the pagoda and shrine to pray for a betterment of their conditions. They knew that if they worked hard and if they had land, they would become better off.

With almost complete unanimity, interviewees indicate that the Front practiced a policy of religious freedom. People could "pray to Jesus and Buddha" if they wished, but the Front reserved the right to point out that prayers would not "win the war." No competing ideological elements were allowed to interfere with NLF efforts to persuade peasants that they did indeed have the power to seize control of the countryside.

In explaining to peasants the "unjust system" in which they lived, the NLF emphasized the connection between the villagers' misery and rural property arrangements. A defector recalled that

I also had to learn about landowners' exploitation of the poor. The instructor said that South Vietnam is a rich country, that on the ground, there is rice and fruit, in the water, there are fish and sea products; and under the ground, there are exploitable mines. "But nevertheless," they said, "The people are still poor because we have been exploited endlessly!" As evidence, an old and poor villager was then led into the class, and this old man related how he has been exploited by land-

owners during his life. In conclusion, the instructors summoned us to follow the Revolution and to take up arms to liberate ourselves from the imperialists and the landowners' yoke.

According to the Front, this exploitation had developed as the result of a historical process.

In the formation of the earth, land didn't belong to anyone. But since there have been people who were shrewder than others, knew how to exploit others, and to seize their land, the man-exploiting-man system was born under these circumstances. The Front, therefore, had to stand up and redistribute land to the poor.

"The Front said that the landlords from whom the poor people rented the ricefields were exploiting the people," remembered another respondent, hostile to the NLF. "The Front said that the ricefields were a natural gift and that they were not the products of anyone's making, and that the landlords had relied on the imperialists to acquire their vast land holdings." The peasants' poverty was thus to be explained not in terms of the absence of "heavens' blessings," but instead as a consequence of a "man-exploiting-man system" set up to benefit the landlords.

These arguments paved the way for confiscations and land reform by calling into question the claims of landowners on their property. They rested on the expectation that, like peasants in so many other parts of the world, the rural dwellers of My Tho were prepared to support the redistribution of the land. For such peasants, land reform would not appear to be a drastic break with tradition, but rather as a common sense restoration of the natural arrangements which an inequitable social system had deformed. If "in the formation of the earth, land didn't belong to anyone," then the landlords were nothing more than usurpers. "Land cannot be private property," asserted a cadre. "Land is given to mankind by Nature and the Front is about to distribute it equally to everyone. There will no longer be rich and poor."

By stressing the goal of economic equality, Front cadres

presented land reform as part of a larger endeavor: to prevent property ownership from becoming a source of power over other people. A female POW analyzed the land question in these terms :

Very poor, poor and middle farmers are considered good elements by the Front, because they are generally industrious people, living on the fruits of their own labor. They are not exploiting anyone. The Front's aim is to improve their welfare and to help all of them to rise to the middle farmer class. But the Front will prevent them from going higher, because if they become rich farmers, they would then care only for their own interests. They would become selfish, and would forget their civic duties. I think land distribution is really a good deed and that, thanks to it, the poor will get richer and nobody will have to steal and to rob for their living.

Taking land from the rich and giving it to the poor was, in other words, not merely an attempt to turn the social system upside down, so that new owners could oppress their neighbors. On the contrary, the project was designed to change qualitatively the social role of property. One peasant grasped this change in the terms of the abolition of wage labor.

Yes, I did think about the building of a new society where there was no exploitation between man and man, e.g., where I did not have to hire my labor to another person and he did not have to hire his to me, where there were no landlords, and the people were free to work and free to enjoy.

A property system which allowed some free access to the wealth of the land, while condemning others to accept a position of inferiority, and to sell their labor power in order to live, was firmly rejected by the NLF, and by many of the peasants who were attracted to its programs.

In struggling to create a society where everyone was a "middle farmer," the Front and the peasants of My Tho were evolving an egalitarian principle of social organization. The female POW quoted above sided with the Front because she

liked its aim of building up a just and democratic society in which the people's welfare will be taken care of, and in which the people will love one another and eliminate the exploitation of man by man. I am sure that the Front can bring about this good society.

Another POW stated, "I wanted to see a society in which no one would be exploited, in which men would not kill each other for money, and in which no one could use money or power to oppress others." "The reason why Front cadres were so active and dedicated," explained a defector,

was that the Front had declared that it would bring to the people egalitarianism in every respect. The farmers would become the owners of the land they were working on now. The workers would own the factories they were working in. Therefore, the cadres had to work hard to keep their land and factories for their children and grand-children to benefit from it.

"Peasants had to struggle against landlords," a POW remembered being told, "in order to be in a position to enjoy their own productions." This respondent's "ideal" was "to struggle for equality among people, to erase all class distinction in society." As we read these affirmations, we can see that narrow self-interest only partially explains the participation of many villagers in the revolution. For them, gaining more land was only part of a broader social transformation. Here is how another POW described his motives.

I left my family to fight and bring rights and material benefits to the people, to my family and also to myself. If we achieved success, my family and

other families in my village would share in the prosperity and happiness. There wouldn't be any more differences between classes — there wouldn't by anyone too rich or anyone too poor — and all social injustices would be corrected. No one would have to work as servants for others — no one would be insulted and humiliated by their masters.

That was my goal.

In the process of combating the destructive effects of an inequitable system of property ownership, peasants were led to imagine the contours of a society in which the common sharing of economic resources would end exploitation once and for all.

Cadres who discussed the matter in detail realized that it would be a long time before the Front could meaningfully contemplate a socialist, let alone a communist transformation of society. One POW saw the issue in these terms :

In order to reach the proletarian society, we have to go step by step through socialism first, and then reach Communism. The South hasn't even set up any cooperatives, so it hasn't reached the socialist stage. In discussion sessions, the cadres said that we were still at the stage of private ownership, and that in the future, we would have to go through socialism before we could have Communism. But this would take a very long time, and no one knew when it could be accomplished.

The interview transcripts offer some evidence that in 1965 the Front did try to press ahead in some areas of My Tho with the development of agricultural cooperatives. A POW reports being told that "starting in 1966, the Front would begin to implement socialist doctrines in the South." He spoke of plans for "collective agricultural sites," managed by local Farmers' Associations, of work exchange teams, wages based on work points, nurseries for children and free medical care. "We were told that the Chinese had accomplished all that, and that the North had been applying this socialist doctrine for 3 years." In fact, some respondents speak of experiments with work exchange programs, but

almost all indicate that such programs had to be abandoned because of bombing and shelling and the resistance of peasants who still preferred to work individually.

US-GVN bombardment destroyed whatever material base there might have been for the introduction of cooperative methods of agriculture. In China and North Vietnam, the socialization of agriculture took place in stages. Volunteers set up model projects which gradually expanded as the other peasants realized that cooperative methods lead to higher production and a more comfortable standard of living than could be generated by the old family-based economic system. But in My Tho after 1965, no such plan could be implemented. The fruits of collective labor were bombed and shelled, or napalmed, or plowed up by tanks, just as fast as the crops of peasants still engaged in solitary work. Villagers who were dubious about cooperatives therefore had no economic incentive to try the new form of organization. In fact, as we have seen, peasants working in groups were worse off than their individualistic neighbors, since they made better targets for enemy firepower. Escalation thus created a situation where in the short run the socialization of agricultural production actually hurt the people who agreed to participate. Given the circumstances, such plans had to be temporarily set aside.

But if socialism was still something of an abstraction to most peasants, at the same time many believed that the Front program would improve the material conditions of their lives. While they could not offer a sophisticated blueprint for the socialization of the means of production, they knew that there were concrete advances to be made if they followed the NLF and the example of the North. For example, one defector stated that,

In 1964, during a political indoctrination session, the cadre said that class struggle was carried out to improve the lot of the poor farmer's class so that they could have "good food and good clothes." The cadres also said that in order to be able to enjoy such privileges, we should struggle against the landlords, the feudalists, and the imperialists.

Another respondent, a POW, listed these aspirations :

After I joined the Front, I was indoctrinated and I thought about my future as follows. First of all, I wanted to give myself and other people freedom. Second, I wanted to fight so that my family and the Very Poor Farmers wouldn't be exploited by the landowners any more, and so that there would be no exploiters of the people left. Third, when I married and had children, I would see to it that my children have an easy life — that is to say, that they have enough to eat and to wear, and a house to live in. They must have a good education. I thought that, in order to get all this, I would have to fight for the unification of the country and for peace. In order to get this, we had to win over the foreign army and we had to chase them from Vietnam.

“Why not join the Revolution and fight with us ?” another respondent, a defector, was asked :

When national reunification is achieved Communism will be established. Then we'll advance to universal communism. Your life will be very happy. There will be no rich and no poor. If someone in your family gets sick, he'll be taken care of by the doctors and you won't even have to pay for the medicine. You'll be paid for your work and you'll have enough to eat. After the harvest, everyone will put their paddy together in a common store. When you need paddy to eat, you'll just go to the store to get the grain. You won't have to live in the fear that you might starve one of these days.

In the light of these excerpts, we can see why US-GVN authorities were so overwhelmed on the political plane by their opponents. In competition with Saigon's anti-communist exhortations, the Front put forward its vision of the future, rich in specific details concerning land, subsistence,

clothing, health and education — the very issues which most preoccupied the peasants in their daily lives.

Within the village, groups responded with varying degrees of enthusiasm to the NLF program. Prosperous peasants were cautious, and in turn the cadres regarded them with suspicion. "I think that the property owners certainly didn't like the revolution," said a POW, "because they knew that this is a proletarian revolution. If this revolution succeeded, their interests would be hurt, because this is a class struggle." In some villages, the insurgency built up so much momentum that even the rich were swept along, but the quality of their commitment continued to inspire a certain skepticism. "The upper middle farmers and rich farmers that joined the Front were just opportunists," insisted a defector, who was voicing commonly held views :

When the Front was strong, they were very zealous, but when the Front weakened, they joined the other side. Only the poor and very poor farmers who had been exploited by the landlords were staunch supporters of the VC and I'm sure they will fight till the end.

Those of upper class background who made a genuine effort to stay with the Front were put through a prolonged apprenticeship, during which they were carefully watched. A defector explained that

When these representatives (of the intellectuals, bourgeoisie and religious sects) had been with the Front for some time — from seven months to a year — and proven by their enthusiasm that they could be trusted, the VC would start propagandizing them about the class struggle and about the Party. If they responded favorably to this propaganda the VC would push their propaganda further and gradually transform them into Party members.

For another respondent, a POW, the issue was clear-cut : "If the higher classes dare to live and die with the lower classes against the higher classes," then they could be in-

tegrated into the Front.

The position of the middle peasants was more ambiguous. People of some means (when compared with most of the villagers), and perhaps even employing the labor power of others, middle peasants might in fact be owners of no more than two or three acres of land apiece. Better off than their neighbors, they were still far from economically secure. Not surprisingly, the political character of this intermediate group tended to be equivocal. No solid majority in the countryside could be created without their participation, and the Front never ceased to reserve for them a place of honor within its ranks. At the same time, the frankly class-oriented politics of the NLF did not appeal to the middle peasants quite as strongly as it did to their poorer neighbors. Some observers thought that middle peasants were no more trustworthy than the rich. They too falsely aligned themselves with the NLF, in the hope "that the Front would protect their property and forgive their crime of 'exploiting the people,'" as one defector put it. Another defector, a middle peasant, frankly told the interviewer that "under the Front's control, it was better for me to be a Front cadre in order to keep intact my position in the village — that of a man with a little property and a certain reputation among his peers." Ready enough to participate in good times, such recruits were naturally inclined to desert as soon as the trend of the war seemed to be swinging against the NLF.

The cadres had to move with care because, as we have seen, the thrust of land reform policy was to create a village full of "middle farmers." According to NLF plans, land reform was only a stage, and new landowners were to be persuaded to join cooperatives before they became entrenched in private ownership. But any kind of delay could undermine the whole program. In the first Indochina War, the Viet Minh had also carried out land reform in various areas of My Tho, but when the United States violated the Geneva Accords of 1954 and set up the Diem dictatorship in the South, the benefits of this redistribution were to some extent negated. The Diem regime helped landlords regain part of what they had lost, and at the same time the inherent dynamics of a village economy based on private ownership also promoted the return of inequality. The more

energetic peasants competed successfully with their less industrious neighbors and gradually bought up their lands. Middle peasants with many children found that, when they subdivided their modest holdings, there was only a poor peasant's legacy for each of their various offspring. The beneficiaries of land reform who prospered tended to become conservatives with a stake in the status quo, and insurgents of one generation thus turned into passive observers, if not outright opponents of the resistance, during the next. To grasp this delicate situation more firmly, the Front in some areas slightly modified its usual practice of appealing to all the middle peasants. Instead it refined its classification system, distinguishing old and new middle peasants. The old middle peasants had been prosperous for some time, and they were to be treated with the same wariness which cadres usually reserved for the rich. The new middle peasants were those who recently had been promoted to this status, and the Front continued to urge them to side with their natural allies among the poor.

Including middle peasants in the vanguard category was not a mere formal device, for cadres had solid arguments designed to win their support. To some extent, the dynamics of the revolution were enough to pull them along. A female defector noted that

As time passed by, the children of more and more of (the middle farmers) joined the Front. When a youth joined the Front, he also pushed his friends to do likewise, and the number of youths who joined the Front became very large. With their children in the Front, these people changed their attitude toward the Front. They supported the Front and had a lot of confidence in it. After the youths joined the Front and learned about the Front's line and policy, they came back and indoctrinated their own parents and the latter became very confident in the Front.

The NLF was also able to offer the prospect of material improvement to the middle peasant, although in this area the situation was not quite as clear cut as it was with the

poor. Here is the way one middle peasant, a defector, sized up the NLF program.

I was much better off than the Poor and Very Poor Farmers in the village, but my life wasn't easy. Our land was located on high and dry ground and the harvests were poor. Besides, when I looked around me I saw many poor people, and I didn't have the heart to sit at home and enjoy my relatively comfortable life — compared to that of the poor. I couldn't take my land and give it to the poor, because my family wouldn't have let me. When (the cadre) told me that after victory was achieved the poor would lead a very happy life I felt enthusiastic. (He) also told me: "You are a Middle Farmer now, but will your children be Middle Farmers too? Where will you get the money to buy enough land to distribute to them so they can earn enough to eat?" I saw the poor people around me and I felt that I didn't want my children to lead the same kind of life. Where would I get the money to buy land so that each of them could have at least 3 or 4 cong of land? The 10 cong of land my family had didn't all belong to me. So I decided to join the Front to ensure the future of my children.

This line of argument was sufficient to hold the loyalty of some middle peasants. Indeed, a number of witnesses claimed that middle farmers made the best cadres. Their somewhat more secure economic position meant that they were not distracted by problems of providing for their families — a constant and often demoralizing worry among poor cadres and fighters.

The interviews show that poor peasants were the most ardent supporters of the NLF. "Everyone in the village," noted a defector,

has to support the Front. The rich farmers' contributions to the Front are the most considerable, but the poor people of the village support the Front

more wholeheartedly, and also carry out more assignments because they hope that the Front will bring them a better life.

To some of these peasants, the emergence of the NLF meant an increased dignity and self-respect. According to a female defector :

After the Front came, the people . . . no longer had to live in constant fear of the rich, they no longer had to kowtow to them, and they no longer had to offer the rich the choicest food they had on the anniversaries of the deaths of their ancestors. They now were able to treat the rich like their equals and they could maintain their prestige vis-a-vis the rich.

Another defector remembered joining the Front in search of "glory," which he defined as the ability "to make a revolution in order to liberate the people, and to prevent landlords and wealthy farmers from crushing me down. That's what I liked." Another reported that, "I felt much encouraged when the Front emerged because under the Front's control, poor farmers aren't despised by the rich as they were before." A fourth defector stated that

I liked most of all the distribution of wealth to the poor people. I saw that the poor people were the slaves of the rich, they had to work as servants and hired laborers for the rich. I loved the poor people and was convinced that the rich class was exploiting the poor class.

Greater self-respect seemed to lead to a more profound class consciousness. "I loved the poor people," this peasant affirms. And in fact, a major theme of Front propaganda addressed to poor peasants was that victories "were due to their patriotism and to their love of their social class."

Another theme, often stressed, was that the poor, once the most downtrodden group, were to become the vanguard

of the revolution. This point was noted by a defector who recalled that

with regard to the Very Poor Farmers, they supported the Front wholeheartedly, because the Front declared that their class was the main class in society and the leading class in the country. The Front, therefore, satisfied the pride of the Very Poor Farmers who had always been despised by everyone.

"The poor farmers wholeheartedly backed the Front because they were the ones the Front took the greatest care of," said another defector. "The cadres promised them: 'The poor farmers will have the glory of assuming the leadership of the countryside, and of returning the land to the farmers'". "The Front used the land question to egg the farmers on," a third defector stated,

The Front declared that it would give rights and benefits to the poor and that it would make the farmers the owners of the land they till and the masters of the countryside, and for this reason most of the Poor and Very Poor Farmers supported it wholeheartedly.

Still another defector called attention to the same theme.

The cadres spoke highly of the Poor Farmers' class, promised to give them land and make their class the leading one once the Revolution was accomplished. So one or two months after harping on such propaganda, the Front succeeded in gaining the wholehearted support of the poor farmers and sharecroppers in the village.

By "harping on" this message, by using "the land question to egg the farmers on," the Front was counting on the readiness of the poor peasants to fight for their own interests within the framework of the guerrilla movement.

A number of peasants testified to the power of these appeals. For example, a defector stated that

Among the lessons, the principal one that taught that socialism could bring happiness to man pleased me most. It also said that poor farmers would become the masters of their land and orchards, and the workers the masters of their factories, etc. I like these most.

Along the same lines, another defector offered this view :

I must admit that when the Communists talked about the policy and line of the Party, it all sounded so good. They said that they were fighting to give land to the farmers and to make the farmers the owners of the land they till and the workers the owners of the mills. When I heard this, I thought that this was exactly the right policy to be carried out.

The Party analysis involved a total change in the social role of poor peasants and yet the respondent affirms that "when I heard this, I thought that this was exactly the right policy to be carried out." In such matter-of-fact declarations, we can measure the enormous impact of the NLF on a society where for centuries poor peasants had been confined to the bottom of the social hierarchy.

Other witnesses were even more enthusiastic, imagining that the liberation of their class would form part of a universal revolution. Here is the testimony of a POW :

When I heard that socialism would grant rights and material benefits to everyone, and would bring material well-being to the people, I was bowled over and thought that socialism was a right doctrine. I found it very appealing because I wanted to see the world living under universal Communism. When universal Communism was achieved, there would no longer be any national boundaries, and all

people in the world would live as brothers. I liked this very much. I was poor, and I liked the idea of bringing material well-being to all the people — all the poor liked this idea.

Reading these affirmations, scattered throughout the transcripts and expressed with fervor and a striking lack of self-consciousness, we begin to sense what kind of force the NLF had created. "All the poor liked the idea," notes this respondent in speaking of the Front's program of "bringing material well being to all the people." The NLF had succeeded in imbuing a social class with its revolutionary vision.

Many of these declarations were made by defectors. Those who deserted, because of illness, a loss of faith in final victory, mounting family concerns or internecine quarrels, did not all forget the NLF program. One defector stated that the Front's political theory "was great yet it could not be implemented." Another respondent, a POW who was trying to persuade GVN authorities that he should really be classified as a "rallier," remembered that at one time, "the people and I longed for the Front to win because



Saigon Students Protest ARVN Troop Presence in Cambodia

it stated it was fighting for social justice and for erasing all class distinctions." He offered the opinion that, "If the GVN wins the war, there will not be any changes in the society. If the Front wins there would not be any class distinction, and men would not be exploited by men." But then, reminding himself that he is supposed to be a "rallier," the POW somewhat lamely added, "I think I could enjoy my life no matter how the war turns out."

The most poignant interview in this respect is one of the last in the series. "At first, I didn't pay much credit to the contents of the (Chieu Hoi) leaflets," this defector reports.

I was a poor farmer who had been given land and I felt indebted to the Front for having assisted me by giving me land. I must say that during the previous years my annual income increased noticeably and life became easier for me. So I did support the Front wholeheartedly. I wished it success because it would bring more profits to a poor farmer like me.

But faced with the prospect of being drafted by the Front, he decided to defect. "If I was drafted," he says to the interviewer, "I might perhaps be killed and then land would be of no use to me. Since there was no hope for me to safeguard the land, I thought I had better give it up and rally to the GVN."

Interviewer : Did you ever expect that the GVN might defend your interests against the landlords after it wins over the Front ?

Respondent : I never expected this. If the GVN wins, I will certainly lose the land. But now, it doesn't matter any more.

Interviewer : Do you ever hear of any GVN land reform projects ?

Respondent : Never.

Interviewer : How would you feel if the GVN allows you to keep the land after it wins over the Front ?

Respondent : That would be marvelous. But what about the landlords, then ?

"The Government as presented to the poor farmers

through VC propaganda was a coalition of landlords and reactionaries," the interviewer informs us in his postscript. The propaganda stuck with this defector and with many others, long after they had lost hope in the ultimate victory of the Front. "It doesn't matter any more," says the respondent, of his lost land. Though he has defected to what he expects to be the winning side, his mood is gloomy. The transcript suggests that he experiences the decline of the Front as a personal defeat.

We can sense that this defector did not take lightly the decision to leave home. NLF strategy was based on the hope that other poor peasants would be even more steadfast. They were a vanguard not as a consequence of some doctrinal peculiarity, or because Front leaders liked them better than the rich. Reliance on poor peasants was a practical necessity. As one defector noted, the Party "always said that the members of the well-off classes wouldn't be as faithful and wouldn't fight as long as the members of the poor classes." While "fighters from the middle farmer class would be afraid of death," in the words of another respondent, "and would think of saving their skins first when they came face to face with danger," peasants of the poor and very poor categories "wouldn't hesitate to die for the right cause."

The pressure of events drove Front cadres to appeal to the poor. Here is a defector's analysis.

If you tried to appeal to everyone you couldn't really appeal deeply to anyone. If you tried to do this, in every indoctrination session you would have the poor farmers, the rich farmers, the notables, the landlords all together, and they felt that this wouldn't work. For example, if you had an indoctrination session to denounce the landlords, and you had the landlords sitting over there, the rich farmers over here, the poor farmers over there, and the notables over there, it would make it rather difficult to carry out the denunciation, so that if you tried to win them all over together like this, you would not do very well. They felt that if you

made a special appeal to the middle, poor and very poor farmers who were in the large majority, you would get better results, and that if they shunted the others aside it wouldn't be very harmful.

Along the same lines, numerous respondents explained the resilience of the Front by pointing to the class background of its members. For example, a POW described the Party Chapter Secretary in his village as "an effective cadre with a good sense of ideology, a high fighting spirit and a deep loyalty to his class, which is the proletarian class." In spite of their lack of education, their ignorance of "any working methods, any laws," these poor peasants were supremely qualified in one key area: having the most to gain by the destruction of the old society, they could be counted on to fight long after other, more prosperous peasants had been persuaded to abandon the struggle.

Class-oriented politics enabled the Front to maintain its position in many villages even during the worst of US-GVN bombing and shelling. Viet Minh land reform in the early fifties, and NLF land reform ten years later, gave many people that stake in the countryside which made them so determined to cling to their fields, and which drew them back to the village whenever the bombing and shelling abated. The Front could count peasant feeling for the land among its political assets precisely because it had identified itself with the aspirations of the villagers and had taken concrete steps to multiply the number of small holders.

Throughout the escalation, cadres kept coming back to this basic issue. If the NLF won, land reform would be consolidated and extended, if the GVN won, peasants would lose all the fields they had acquired. This was what the war was all about. (20) As one cadre argued,

Our gardens, our land and our prosperous economic income are the results of many years of endurance and hardships of our ancestors. It is our duty to guard this land and not to let it fall in the hands of our enemy who will exploit us as much as they can. We don't care how much blood we have

to shed when dealing with our enemy, we will fight until the end for our right and for all that our enemy conspires to usurp.

Those who remained in the villages did so because they were moved by such appeals. "One always takes care of the tree that gives one fruit," explained a respondent in analyzing peasant loyalty to the Front. "What about your personal prestige?" a POW was asked. "Don't you think you will be glorious if the Front wins?" "I couldn't care less about glory," was the blunt reply, "because glory is not so important as land." After all, "For a peasant, being able to participate in controlling the countryside is the highest aspiration," another POW affirmed. "All of them longed to have land to till." Along these lines, a defector noted that

Most of (the people) like (land distribution) very much. They didn't have any land to till, so when the Front gave them land, they naturally were very happy about it. Some liked it so much that they kept clinging to their land, in spite of the insecurity in the village.

These peasants held on to their fields not because they were too miserable to make a living anywhere else, but because of an unshakeable political commitment. According to another defector :

As the war is growing in intensity and spreading everywhere and as the Front cannot protect its rear areas, the people no longer believe in the Front's final victory. They have evacuated to government areas in large numbers leaving all their property behind. Only the very poor farmers who have profited from the land redistribution still believe in the Front and are determined to stay on in the village despite bombings and shellings. They said, "Why don't we stay on in the village to farm the land the Front has given us? Isn't it better to

die with a full stomach? If we go and settle in government-held areas, we may avoid being killed by bombings and shellings but we will surely die of hunger. Such a death will be, of course, much more shameful."

This depth of conviction served to vindicate the NLF strategy of relying on poor peasants. "Fanatic" determination and an unbroken faith in "the Front's final victory" held together a nucleus of poor peasants in spite of massive US-GVN efforts to dislodge them.

THE FORCE OF HATRED

The decision of cadres to stay with the Front did not rest alone on visions of a better society after liberation. Driving them on with at least an equal urgency was the force of hatred. (21) For many, resentment against those responsible for their poverty, as well as indignation aimed at an enemy who conducted the war with extreme brutality, fueled a rage which not even the frustrations of a protracted war could quench. The first objects of this hatred were the landlords, who refused to "share" the land and "exploited endlessly" those less powerful than they were. "I, myself, hate the landowners, bullies and wicked persons," confessed a POW, who then added, "As a matter of fact, I hate my own landowner." A defector voiced similar sentiments. "What I liked best about the political indoctrination was the hate campaign against the landlords and class struggle because I wanted to struggle for the rights and privileges for my class, and I wanted to be the master of the countryside."

In the minds of peasants, big landowners were closely linked to "feudalists," who in turn were perfectly epitomized by the dictator Diem. As one defector asserted:

The Front called upon the people's patriotism and meanwhile promised that it would overthrow Diem's regime in a very short time. This was exactly what the people were longing for because Diem

had made their blood boil for a long time with the forced labor that had been imposed on everyone of them.

In another transcript, a dramatic exchange brings out the same point. "Who has started the class struggle? Who has invaded South Vietnam?" demanded an irate interviewer; "The Front has acted as a war criminal, and an invader, has it not?" The respondent, a POW, cautiously replied: "I cannot determine who is the true war criminal because I don't know who has started the war first?" But under persistent hostile questioning, he gradually revealed his true thoughts:

... It might be that the Front started the war first. However, I still have some misgivings about this matter, for I have seen so many cadres arrested and detained by the Diem government in 1957-1958. Although a peace advocate myself, I could not help feeling suspicious, the question that has kept bothering me is why the Government did not give the ex' Viet Minh cadres a chance to live in peace and happiness, but instead sought to apprehend them. To me, this is an act of provocation. And it is this very act that has forced the former VC cadres to side with the Front, to save their own lives.

To these fugitives, "the uprising meant survival," argued the POW. Warming to his subject, he went on to affirm:

I like best the class struggle objective (of the Front) because I belong to the poor farmer class. The next thing I like is the liberation of the people. I am for peace also. But in order to have peace, there has to be fighting and killing.

This "peace advocate" ended on a grim note: "Peace can only be achieved when one participant in the war is completely defeated." Cadres like this man believed that they were involved in a war to the death with an enemy who did not give people "a chance to live in peace and happiness."

They would not stop until the Saigon regime had been "completely defeated."

According to the Front, hating landlords and feudalists led directly to anti-imperialism. The real enemy, the one which gave substance to the threats of landlords and kept the Saigon regime afloat, was the United States. Before 1965, few peasants had ever seen an American, but some were ready to believe the worst. Like the Japanese and French before, these foreigners were rich, and it seemed logical that they "would never want to liberate the poor. (The U.S.) would be just like France and Japan." After 1965, of course, the Vietnamese image of the United States took on more substance. In analyzing atrocities, the cadres argued

that the aims of the Americans were to annihilate the Vietnamese nation and send their own people to colonize this land. These killings constituted the very policy of the American government, and were not misdeeds committed by undisciplined soldiers.

Another defector remembered a similar speech, made by a Front cadre to the assembled peasants :

They should not hesitate to fight because the Americans were invading the country, and because the Americans' aim was to take over the country and to transform it into a colony and a military base. The troops hated the Americans as much as they did the French before. It angered them to hear that the GVN had invited the Americans to come to Vietnam to sow death and destruction.

In discussions with villagers, the cadres attempted to locate American intervention within their class analysis of the Vietnamese situation: "Speaking of imperialism," they

said that the Party represented the poor farmers class. So long as the imperialists, e.g., capitalists, still existed, the workers would never become

the masters of the factories; therefore we should fight the imperialists to seize the factories in order to promote our interests. If the imperialists survived, the factories would be in the hands of the Americans and the interests of the working class would not be served. In the Front, the working class was always cited in every effort to stir up the fighting spirit of Party members.

In this way, U. S. escalation was seen as a new phase in the struggle "to make the farmers the owners of the land they till and the workers the owners of the mills." As a respondent noted, "In short, everything the Front said aimed at fostering the people's hatred against the Americans." The invaders would have to be defeated, along with the landlords and Saigon officials they supported, before peasants could lay down their arms.

The Front placed American intervention within the context of Vietnamese history. Speaking of the early sixties, a defector explained :

It's true that the people haven't yet witnessed the Americans doing anything wrong and in reality, anti-American slogans weren't as appealing as anti-Diem slogans. But the Front has cleverly associated the Americans with Diem's misdeeds such as forced labor for the construction of Agrovilles, and arbitrary arrests of former resistance cadres. The Front has also charged them with imperialist aims. In the people's eyes, the imperialists are regarded as the defenders of the native landlords' interests. Since most of the people hate landlords, they abhor the Americans. Front propaganda repeatedly stated that it was the Americans who started this special war, incited Diem to misbehave toward the people, and ordered helicopter crews to kill the innocent and ARVN soldiers to take the gall bladders from human bodies. So far, this malicious propaganda has penetrated the villagers' minds so deeply that the latter, even though

they haven't come across any Americans yet, have a preconceived opinion about them and regard the Americans as even more cruel than the French. On the other hand, the Front continuously appeals to the national consciousness, and inspires the people by reminding them of the recent victory over the French and the past heroic struggles against the Chinese so that the people reach the point that they wouldn't tolerate anyone who fears the enemy.

When the war escalated in 1965, the American people were taken by surprise. But for the peasants of My Tho, the appearance of U.S. forces confirmed a line of analysis to which they had been exposed for many years.

For the NLF, hatred was a vital resource which cadres should work to intensify. According to a defector,

Before carrying out its land distribution at the beginning of 1965, the Front had the people study this policy in order to instill hatred in the minds of the Farmers against the landlords and the Rich Farmers. During indoctrination sessions, the cadres emphasized the exploitation of the rich farmers and landlords who "stayed idle in the shade but ate from golden bowls." It was the farmers who had to labor to till the land. The landlords and the rich farmers acted as henchmen of the colonialists and feudalists in order to be able to clear forest land and transfer it into rice fields, but they themselves had never farmed the land.

These efforts were concentrated especially on the personal experience of the peasants. Here are the recollections of a defector.

(The cadres) told me that our people had been oppressed, exploited, and stripped of all their rights by the American imperialists and their henchmen, in their scheme to impoverish the people. He used

as an example, my family, my father and mother who slaved all year round, selling their labor, their sweat, and their tears yet they achieved nothing but poverty.

The expression of hatred was not just a device to make people feel better. As one high level cadre stated to a group of subordinates, whose latest assignment had not been fully carried out: "Comrades, you didn't succeed, because you didn't give enough indoctrination, and haven't brought the hatred to the proper level. That's why all the political and military missions didn't get good results." In this sense, underlining the peasants' hatred of their enemies was integral to the task of "motivating the people."

Anti-imperialists hate campaigns were similar to those directed against landlords and feudalists in that they focused on the individual's personal experience. One defector remembered a "speak bitterness" session for Party members in which participants took turns describing the hardships of friends and relatives during the war: "I witnessed many of (the cadres) crying. The atmosphere of hatred was terrible. The degree of hatred, in my opinion, was noticeably increased. Everyone swore that he would die for the Party's sake." These cadres, and others like them, were not naive idealists playing with a blueprint for utopia. On the contrary, they were driven people whose experience had left them deeply scarred. Dreaming of revenge, they longed to square accounts with enemies for whom they felt a terrible hatred.

Knowing how to mobilize the peasants' hatred was not as simple as one might assume. For example, dwelling on atrocities committed by the other side did not always serve a useful purpose. The United States was, after all, an antagonist of apparently unlimited power, and its brutal methods tended to inspire as much fear as anger. Within the ranks of the NLF, firm measures had to be taken to contain the natural reactions of cadres who were intimidated by the enemy. According to a defector,

anyone who is accused of fear of the Americans

always reacts strongly against it. The District Committee member who wants to accuse a minor cadre of having this fear has to move slowly to this ultimate criticism by presenting evidence before he comes out with it. The usual reaction of the cadres, after they acknowledged being subdued by this fear, is to make greater and bolder efforts in order to prove they no longer fear the Americans. In fact, within the Front-controlled area, anyone who is considered afraid of the Americans is regarded as an outcast, like a woman accused of illicit affairs.

Among villagers, the problem was even more delicate, and hate campaigns directed against the United States could easily backfire. In one village, after a particularly violent anti-imperialist speech, many people simply packed up and left, "because they are doubtful of the capacity of the few guerrillas and cadres to protect them from the cruel and strong Americans."

Panic, however, was not the only danger. Explosions of rage were no more valuable to the Front than fearful timidity. With their fire-power, the Americans always did best against a reckless enemy, and in fact U. S. military leaders regularly complained about the refusal of the guerrillas to "stand up and fight." Within the framework of a protracted war strategy, cadres cautioned followers to control their feelings, to avoid impulsive actions, to discipline themselves within the restrictions of an approach which stressed patience and the careful husbanding of resources.

In line with this strategy, cadres asked the peasants to do something quite special with the spontaneous anger they felt. The anti-American campaigns were not so simple as they might appear at first glance. Take, for example, the following anecdote concerning a military unit which had just been caught out in the open during an American bombing raid:

Some of the fighters even went so far as to underestimate the effectiveness of the jets. They said:

"The Americans who piloted the L-19 and the jets were not very clever. Our whole battalion was here and yet they killed only a few." But they were criticized at once for saying that. The political officer scolded them right away and said: "Do you wish that the Americans had killed more people? Are you happy because a few of our brothers got killed? You should instead hate the Americans with all your heart and translate this hatred into action by fighting harder against the Americans."

This cadre has something very precise in mind when he tells soldiers to hate the Americans "with all your heart." Blind rage is not his goal, since incensed fighters who challenged U.S. planes would quickly be wiped out. On a more subtle level, he is disturbed by the note of contempt in the fighter's remarks. In fact, U.S. pilots were not incompetent, and soldiers were wasting energy, as well as slipping into a dangerous overconfidence, by adopting an attitude of derision toward their adversaries. What the cadre wants is neither uncontrolled fury nor cynical contempt, but a measured, constant hatred kept under tight rein in order to sustain people over a prolonged period of fighting a more powerful enemy. As one respondent noticed, the most resolute cadres had "harbored their hatred towards the U.S." In a movement without factories and modern technology, this hatred was one of the people's few resources, making possible the sustained effort of a guerrilla war.

The classic peasant revolt is a sudden, violent affair. Long simmering rage explodes, crowds of angry people form, mansions burn and enemies are often cruelly mutilated. Then, sooner or later, the bands are dispersed, leaders punished, and the survivors go home. Fury subsides, and a sullen silence settles over the countryside. Volcanic eruptions, these rebellions quickly seem to build up a formidable striking power, but the intense concentration of feeling thus achieved cannot be maintained for long. Inevitably, the peasants become exhausted, while the passage of time brings other preoccupations, like planting or harvesting, back to the fore.

The NLF has asked peasants to act in a different way, to develop a highly complex relationship to their feelings. They must trust in their own fury, indeed seek it out and bring it to the surface, but at the same time they have to control this hatred under an unbending self-discipline, to store it up against the rigors of a protracted war. The Front has taught villagers to read and write, to blow up bridges and shoot down airplanes. The sophisticated self-awareness it has cultivated among its followers is perhaps an even more noteworthy achievement. The partisans of the NLF understand themselves, they see what they can and cannot do, they know how they must deal with themselves if they hope to achieve their long sought goals.

WOMEN "WITHOUT CAUTION AND CARE"

From its origins, the NLF was strongly committed to winning the support of women villagers. A well informed male defector suggests that in this endeavor the Front had been far more effective than its Viet Minh predecessor. Beginning in the early 1960s, women "expressed their ideas vehemently, and participated in NLF activities aggressively," according to a female defector, who then went on to recall:

When I was promoted to be a hamlet cadre I was taught the duties and responsibilities of a woman in a time of national danger. First of all, if a woman wants to be regarded as equal to a man, she must take charge of their responsibilities toward the people, and carry out the activities of a man, if necessary!

As we have seen, village Women's Associations were in the forefront of local politics. They took responsibility for "motivating the people," as well as for organizing "face-to-face struggles" against the Saigon regime.

Members of this Association were also active around issues relating specifically to their status as women. The following summary was offered by a male defector:

The goals of the Women's Association, besides serving the nation, was to liberate themselves from the following three oppressions. They had to struggle to obtain equality with men, to abolish the system of daughter-in-law (the wives were the slaves of their husbands' families), to abolish the system whereby the men were respected and women despised, and to liberate themselves from the oppression of the men.

The daughter-in-law "system" affected women's lives in an immediate way. A female defector stated that, as a result of the Front's efforts, daughters-in-law "no longer had to observe old customs such as bowing to the in-laws every time they came in and went out of the house." Another woman, a POW, affirmed:

I liked life in the Front and did not have any dissatisfaction with the Front. I considered my serving the Front an escape from all the hardships I endured while I lived with my mother-in-law before I joined the Front. She behaved very harshly toward me. It was also an opportunity for me to care for the people's welfare and happiness. That is what I liked the most.

By agitating in this area, and also by criticizing other institutions like forced marriages, the NLF helped women identify and change sexist conditions rooted in the family structure.

The Front also conducted a campaign against "lewdness" and "illicit" behavior. According to a female defector,

We were told that the Communist policy didn't permit the men to have many wives, and that husbands should treat their wives as equals—the men shouldn't abandon their wives for other women. It was said that any cadres who took many wives violated the teachings of the Communists, and harmed the revolution in the eyes of the people.

Sexually unscrupulous individuals were among the main targets during regular criticism and self-criticism sessions. As a male POW described them, the sessions were in fact designed precisely to isolate and reform this kind of anti-social conduct :

The critique is good in that it can turn a criminal into a good individual. It can cause a lot of difficulties for people who do not want to admit their mistakes and continue to commit the crimes. For example, a married man can be severely criticized by the village chapter or the District Party committee if he is involved in some illegal love affairs with other women. If he repents from his vice, he can become a good individual. If not, he will be criticized again and again. Lots of people readily admitted their faults and tried to correct them. These would be considered virtuous and loyal to the revolution and the people. Others did not admit their mistakes and continued to commit them again and again. These would be subjected to every-mounting criticism and would feel dissatisfied with the Revolution and would seek to defect the Front and the people.

Political cadres who tried to "slip into the beds of women in the village," ran the risk of demotion or even exclusion from the Party. "I joined the Front when it first arose," stated a male defector, in explaining why it took him so long to become a Party member :

I belonged to the basic social class, I performed my tasks well, I did well in the training courses, but I was accused of having a bad behavior because of my lewdness and my many illicit love affairs, and for this reason, I wasn't admitted in the Party early, even though I became a Labor Youth member in 1962.

The transcripts make clear that the NLF attempted in a systematic way to break up patterns of sexual objectivica-

tion which undermined the dignity and autonomy of women. A POW remembered that the Viet Minh had employed "the alluring women tactic," whereby female cadres posing as prostitutes gained access to GVN military posts. But at present, he observed, this tactic "is no longer used because the Front thinks that this degrades womanhood."



Night Classes

Escalation had a complicated effect on the lives of village women. On the one hand, the sheer volume of physical work required of them was sharply increased. A male defector noted that

In peacetime, the majority of working people were men. The source of labor was enough. Today most laborers are women. Male villagers and youths have either joined the military service or taken refuge in secure areas. Only a few youth remain in the a hamlet. They do not have legal papers, ID cards, and so on, so they do not dare to go out to work in the field or to leave the hamlet. All hard work such as plowing, thrashing, or building small dikes are done by women and old people.

"At present," stated a female defector in 1967, the women

have not time to work for the NLF or to attend meetings. If compelled to attend meetings, they no longer express their ideas enthusiastically. In short, the people's daily problems of securing food and clothing have inadvertently taken the women back to their families.

As we have seen, all the popular associations were hurt by escalation. Women were no exceptions to the general trend which saw the Front's mass activities decline.

At the same time, the pressures keeping women out of the insurgency were being counterbalanced by a special effort on the part of Front representatives to bring them into its ranks. Faced after 1965 with a critical shortage of cadres and soldiers, the NLF mounted an unprecedented drive to mobilize the female population. One male defector indicated that in 1967 the Main Force units of the Front army inducted more women than men by a proportion of two to one. Meanwhile, the specialized branches of the Front civilian organization, the sections for finance, propaganda, security, and other tasks, were also making a special effort to recruit women. In this way, the crisis of an escalating war compelled the Front to deepen and extend its commitment to sexual equality.

This participation of women in the Front provoked opposition. First of all, families were likely to take exception. In the following citation, a female defector recalls the complaints of her father :

You're my girl. Because you have left this house day and night and abandoned your home chores, one-half of our two "cong" of land has not been completely cultivated and weeds have grown up everywhere. Where can we get food to eat? Many persons can work for the revolution, but I can find nobody like you! People who make the revolution do not receive any salaries. Therefore, their activities are limited. They attend meetings sporad-

ically, and they also spend their time doing their home chores. You, however, are always away, and I have to cook your meals, although I have been sick and am old. I feel very bad! I can't stop you from working for the revolution, but you should at least take pity on me and not compel me to cook your daily meals. As your father is old and sick, no cadre could blame you if you stayed home. At present, bombs and shells are poured on the Village. All the male cadres, old and young alike, get so frightened they try to hide themselves, and do not dare to appear among the people. You know this well. Why have you gone out day and night to carry out their activities and to torture yourself? Unfortunately, if you're killed in a bombing or shelling, I will have to bury you. This truly is an unhappy lot. According to the heavenly law, as our ancestors said, children should bury their parents. On the contrary, if parents have to bury their children, this will truly be the ruin of the family, and people will laugh. An old saying goes, "If a man has to bury his wife when he is young and to bury his children when he is old, this will be his greatest grief." If you're not killed by bombing or firing, but instead you continue to go out day and night to make contacts and attend meetings with those cadres, you might be led into a loose life. You might lose your virginity and get pregnant. In that case, I think that it would be better for me to kill myself than to endure shame when I face other people. Take pity on me, and remember all my efforts in bringing you up until you're now an adult girl. You'd better listen to me, and stay at home and care for this family, so that we are not so destitute. Otherwise, if you take your family so lightly and only think of your organization, do whatever you want. But don't tell your cadres to come here to warn or try to motivate me!

This lengthy harangue amounts to a catalogue of all the arguments women had to answer as they decided to become

activists. The speaker manages to mix threats, pathos and flattery, to suggest that his daughter is violating long-standing traditions, causing him great physical and spiritual anguish, is running the risk of losing her virginity, and will probably get killed for her trouble.

The demands made on daughters of such parents were formidable. "I love my father more than anything else in this world," insisted the woman whose father we have just heard.

I love him more than I love my own life. But, at that time (1965-1966) I was very confident in the NLF. Therefore, I was very embarrassed and did not know how to act in that kind of situation, although my father repeatedly cried and pleaded with me very every night.

This and other anecdotes in the transcripts indicate that women often had to pay an emotional price for their political activity which men were spared.

Relatives were not the only ones to hold women back. Attitudes among the male cadres varied. Some described the advances of women without comment or with approval, while others were not sure how they felt. A POW remembered his own reaction when a regroupee showed off a picture of his wife (who still lived in North Vietnam) driving a tractor: "Looking at the photograph, I couldn't tell whether I liked or disliked the North." Some observers were decidedly hostile, like the POW who said:

The Front always speaks highly of the women's role in the war. Slogans such as "Young men fight on the battlefield while women take charge of the rear area" are found everywhere. To encourage women, the Front's policy is to give "equal rights to both men and women." Many women are now assuming important functions in various agencies of the Front. Personally, I have no idea about the ordinary women, but the women cadres whom I met on my various missions and those who worked

in the Province Medical Section seemed to have lost all the charm of the fair sex. In my opinion, women cadres have actually become masculine and ridiculous. They all liked to argue and use grandiloquent "revolutionary" words such as "we must consolidate our spirit to overcome all kinds of hardships — we must strengthen our ideology and fight for the final victory, etc . . ." I never liked women cadres, so I had no girlfriends among them.

The Front called for respectful equality between the sexes, but from time to time we sense the persistence of more traditionally sexist bias. A typical example would be the double standard thinking evident in a passage already cited, where a defector observed that "anyone who is considered afraid of the Americans is regarded as an outcast, like a woman accused of illicit affairs."

The women villagers also had mixed feelings. According to a male POW, some, who "were still deeply influenced by the old-fashioned way of living," and who "were not used to collective living outside the family," did not react sympathetically to the changes they saw taking place. For example, an 86-year-old woman POW spoke harshly of the

female cadres who lead ridiculous ways of living, which are completely out of step with the traditional manner. They are educated by the Front and so they have that manly way of talking and behaving. They liked to use terms that I had no idea what they meant, lived with the male cadres, and don't care about cooking and housekeeping. As soon as they open their mouths, words such as: construction, criteria, struggle, etc . . . come out.

In any case, what happened to women within the Front, where sexual equality was a highly charged political issue, sometimes tended to become detached from the situation throughout the countryside. "Most women in the village are still good housewives," argued a male defector. "Only a minority of them who are working for the Front are indoctrinated with new ideas." But, as other witnesses indicate, the ex-

ample of the cadres was not without its effects on the society around them. "Recently, when I attended a banquet," recalled a male defector,

I found that when the young men told the young women to wash the dishes or to take their meals in the secondary house and not in the main one of the host's family, they replied, "There is now equality between the two sexes. How dare you tell us to wash your dishes and to take our meals in the secondary house whereas, you sit in a large one? That's unfair!" In addition to these stories, the women now often take the equality of the two sexes slogan as their weapon to struggle against the men.

NLF agitation thus helped to spread about "the equality of the two sexes slogan," and as a result this new "weapon" with which "to struggle against the men" became accessible to all women.

Throughout the transcripts, we see female cadres working actively in the Front, in spite of the various obstacles they encountered. These women "live and behave like young men," commented one defector. "They like to argue about everything and carry on their activities regardless of the late hours, and without minding public gossip." "There are quite a number of female cadres in my village," noted another. They "talked politics all day long. Their talks are now sprinkled with political terms which are rather unfamiliar to the ears and, therefore, quite different to the traditional woman's nature." A third observer, a POW, recalled that

There were two female members in the (Village) Party Committee.... Both of these female party members were local people, single, came from the poor class, joined the Revolution from the beginning, about 30 years old. These two female cadres were very enthusiastic in their activities... The villagers liked and respected these two female cadres because of their comportment and their

virtues, but sometimes they ridiculed and mocked their manly way of living: they were away all night long, going here and there, talking to everyone without caution and care like the other women.

Women "without caution and care" had been with the Front from the beginning. They were among the "shadows" hovering outside the houses of frightened peasants in 1960, then standing up "majestuously and bravely" when the NLF came out in the open. We should count them in the ranks of the "fanatics with high morale and an everlasting endurance of hardship" who stayed by the NLF in spite of U. S. escalation. Like the other cadres, they fought to make the poor peasants "masters of the countryside," and to destroy a hated enemy. At the same time, the stakes in the war were even higher for these women since they were also fighting "to liberate themselves from the oppression of the men." When we ask how the NLF kept itself together in spite of American efforts to destroy it, the special stubbornness of many women cadres must be considered an important part of the answer.

One of the best features of the RAND transcripts is that each interview gives us a picture of someone's life, an individual experience full of peculiar detail, an autobiography woven in and out of the greater flow of events. The stories provide a human dimension to the often impersonal history of the war which we get from other sources. Perhaps it would be helpful to review one life history, especially since this account, which is among the most satisfying in the "DT" series, sheds so much light on the role of women in the NLF. (22)

"She is a special case," stated the interviewer of subject #213.

The subject's state of mind is a very complex one. Her belief in the Front's cause is so big that she can't distinguish what is wrong. At the same time, she is very naive, and constantly views all Front cadres as heroes. The image of a few hamlet cadres has impressed her that way although she

didn't know them well.

This 19-year-old woman had been taken prisoner in April 1967 in Chau Thanh District. Among the respondents in the Dinh Tuong series, she is indeed one of the few "special cases," a POW whose outspoken loyalty to the Front survived even the trauma of arrest, torture and imprisonment by the Saigon regime — not to speak of her encounter with an interviewer who did not understand her "naive" dedication to the "wrong" cause.

Working as a seamstress and living in the home of her grandparents, the respondent's political commitment grew out of direct experience.

The sight of misfortunes which happened every day in my village shocked me a great deal. They made me feel that the cause of the Front is right while the GVN, despite its repeated statements of helping the people enjoy a good life, is simply doing harm to the people by setting houses on fire and extorting money by means of arbitrary arrests. The Front's cadres, on the contrary, worked without pay, without any advantages whatsoever. Many of their families didn't even have enough rice to eat, but still, they agreed to continue to work for the villagers in the hamlet. They are willing to accept any sacrifices required of themselves and of their relatives for the country. They helped the people in their work in the fields; they dug ditches to improve the villagers' crops. Since I witnessed the cadres' sacrifices, I paid much respect to the Front although I didn't know much of this organization or what it represented. I viewed the cadres as living embodiments of heroes of our legends; they are those who stand up to fight the evil in order to protect the people. That's why I respected the Front a great deal.

GVN atrocities prompted the respondent to take her first political initiative. A woman cadre asked her to attend the funeral of four men who had been killed by Saigon soldiers.

She "cried a lot because of these misdeeds" and, in spite of fears of GVN retaliation, agreed to participate in the memorial ceremony.

Along with some other young insurgents, this woman had to go against the wishes of her family in order to respond to the Front's appeals. Attending the funeral "was the first time I disobeyed my grandparents," she stated. "This was also the first time I took a resolution of myself. After I listened to the cadres' speech dealing with misdeeds perpetrated by GVN people, I felt most angry. That night, I couldn't sleep." But in spite of such strong feelings, the respondent was not yet ready to break completely with her grandparents. In the weeks that followed, a woman cadre patiently tried to recruit her, while GVN troops continued with their deprivations — they even stole the clothing she was sewing for customers. The decisive moment came in September, 1965 :

Another female cadre came to see me quite unexpectedly. She introduced herself as the Head of the Village Liberation Women's Committee. Her name is XXXXX. She asked to stay overnight in my house. When the night was far advanced, she asked me: "Are you ready to leave your family behind to join the Front now? Do you love your grandparents?" I replied that I had not arranged anything yet since I had lost all my savings in indemnifying the customers. "As for my grandparents, I love them very much. But why did you put this question to me? It sounds quite absurd." "If you do love them, you ought to think about how to secure them a good life," she went on. What do you mean about securing them a good life? I mean that if you do love them very much you ought to see to it that they could enjoy a good life in the years to come. A good life for them could be secured only if the Revolution becomes a success. It will be then that they could live with freedom and welfare. No one might oppress and exploit them, as the enemy is doing to the people at present.

"Her words, in fact, sounded right," commented the respondent, and she made up her mind to join the Front.

When the grandmother learned of this decision, she was deeply wounded :

"Oh! my granddaughter! How can you be so ungrateful to me! Your mother died when she gave birth to you and I have bred you ever since! And now, how can you be so awful towards me by leaving me alone!" After that, my grandparents left us behind and went outdoors. (The female cadre) and I stayed home until 4 PM before we set out. I didn't meet my grandparents anew because they didn't come back home. Either out of discouragement or out of anger at me, they stayed with neighbors seemingly to avoid us.

This painful episode did not shake her resolve.

I felt very sorry for them. They were very old and yet, they had to live under risks of being killed by bombs and bullets every day. But the deeper I felt sorry for them, the quicker I thought I had to join the Front. I believed that the Front's cause is right and therefore, I didn't have any fear of being killed.

Together the two women set out for an NLF base area. The cadre was not insensitive to what this new recruit was going through, and she tried to help the young woman deal with her apprehension and homesickness. "We talked abundantly," recalled the respondent, "I suppose to alleviate my pain and to build up my morale. She said: 'You are a true daughter of the Revolution.'"

The respondent's career in the Front was in many ways exemplary. From a poor peasant background, she acquired in less than two years a variety of technical skills. She served first as a liaison agent, then as a medic, and finally in a demolition unit. Her political understanding grew, and in the course of the interview, she had no trouble dealing with the feeble polemics which the interviewer initiated against the NLF. She sometimes quarreled with other ca-

dres and had her share of disappointments within the movement, but her revolutionary commitment did not waver.

Wherever I went, I could realize how terrific the destruction caused by bombings and shellings was, and the farther the liberated areas were, the more miserable the people's life was: orchards, paddie fields and houses, all of them are being abandoned. All these calamities had been caused by the GVN and the Americans. In point of these calamities, I felt heartbroken and therefore I was more decided to work for the Front so that the enemy would be driven away and freedom and happiness could be secured for everyone.

In her account, we see graphically the force of the "repression-resistance spiral." The more "calamities" she came across, the more determined she became "to work for the Front so that the enemy would be driven away and freedom and happiness could be secured for everyone."

The interview itself helps us to measure this woman's revolutionary stand. Where many respondents, including some POWs, equivocated about the politics of the war, complained that the Front tricked them into serving its cause and repeated freshly learned slogans about "communism" and the "free world," she refused to compromise. Will she agree to go home peacefully if the GVN wins the war?

In case the GVN freed me from jail and torture, I would be very grateful of it but it wouldn't certainly be for this reason that I would agree to stop fighting. As far as soldiers, exploitation, oppression would plague the countryside, I would continue to fight the GVN. If I am freed now, I will return to my grandparents to take care of them until their death. After that, I'll join the Revolution again.

"I'll join the Revolution again": this was no debater's point, but a matter of life and death. The respondent was a pris-

oner, already well acquainted with GVN police methods. Here is her account of events after being captured :

The district chief himself interrogated us. We told him the truth but he didn't want to believe it. He ordered five or six soldiers to kick us with their shoes on our faces, our thorax and our waists. They also forced us to lie down to the ground and with their feet they jumped over our thorax. When we fainted, they threw water on our faces. When we came back to life, they repeated the same torture. We were all covered with blood, which came out from our ears and mouths. We were beaten up this way for a day and after that they locked us up. I couldn't lie down or sit up without pain. I coughed out much blood which spread all around us. To relieve pain, I had to sit with the support of my arms leaning to the wall.

Capture and imprisonment thus represented in a somewhat more intense form the daily experience of villagers subjected to the violence of a ruthless and barbaric enemy. Even more than the bombing and shelling, the sweeps and crop destruction, these torture sessions were designed to break the will of the insurgents, force them to abandon their cause and beg for mercy.

The respondent was not swayed :

On the next morning, the district chief call us again up, and the same torture took place anew with more savagry. I couldn't stand it any longer and thought of ending my life. But before dying, I thought I had to show the district chief my hate and anger. So, I began to curse him and jumped up to strike his face. His spectacles were broken and his eyes were wounded. His anger burst out and he beat me till I fainted. When I came to life again, I saw myself lying in a cell. Pain everywhere in my body and blood was coagulated in puddles all around.

Eventually the prisoner tried unsuccessfully to commit suicide. She was taken to a hospital, then put in jail, where the RAND interviewer found her in July, 1967. If alive today, she is probably still interned along with 200,000 others in the prisons of the Thieu dictatorship.

This scene stays with me more than anything else in the transcripts: a woman answering torture with curses, then smashing the puppet official's glasses into his face. "Heart-broken" at the invasion and destruction of her country, the respondent was not intimidated by the GVN and the Americans. Leaving home and family for the NLF, she developed into a fanatic cadre whose dedication held firm in spite of many "calamities." Seamstress and poor peasant, once in awe of the revolutionaries around her, she herself became one of those "living embodiments of heroes" who in Vietnamese legend "stand up to fight the evil in order to protect the people." We can make sense of the war only if we assume that hers is not at all a "special case." Along with so many others, when faced with American aggression, she chose to live as "a true daughter of the Revolution."

EPILOGUE: FROM TET OFFENSIVE TO "RICE WAR"

On January 30-31, 1968, the National Liberation Front launched its Tet Offensive. In a series of coordinated attacks all over South Vietnam, the NLF struck at over one hundred cities and U. S. bases. In the Mekong Delta, My Tho City, along with many other provincial capitals, was invaded and briefly held by the insurgents. After two years of the most intensive bombardment in military history, with its liberated areas in ruins, its ranks decimated, its surviving cadres worn down by the tensions and hardships of protracted struggle, the NLF brought off the most ambitious campaign in the history of the war.

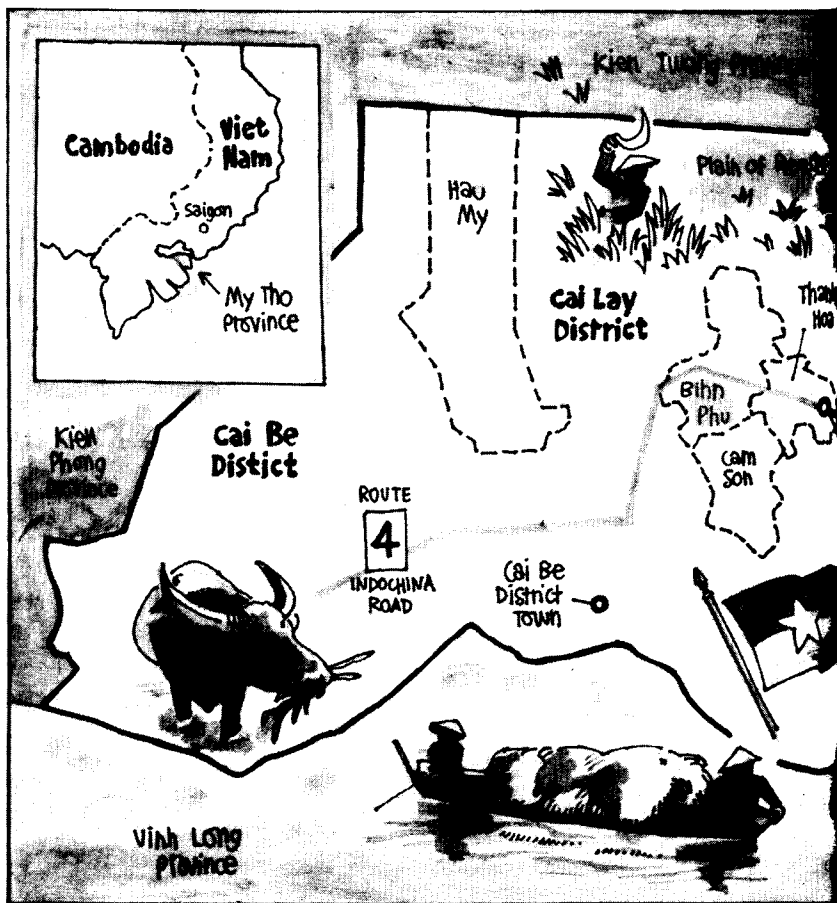
The "DT" transcripts give no warning of the coming offensive, even though the last of the interviews in the series was conducted only days before the attacks. Indeed in one

or two cases, responses are so non-committal that the reader might be pardoned for suspecting that "false ralliers" had been sent out to lull US-GVN authorities with misleading information. From another source, we learn that the Tet Offensive in My Tho Province was a political triumph for the NLF. In a New York Times article, published November 5, 1972, Fox Butterfield speaks of "a recent study for the Rand Corporation" on the Front in Dinh Tuong Province.

... The study noted that before the 1968 Tet offensive, many Vietnamese and American officials thought that the Vietcong in Dinhtuong were on their way to defeat. But once the Communists gave their sudden order to attack, "almost the entire rural population in the province was mobilized and coordinated in support of the attack," the study concluded.

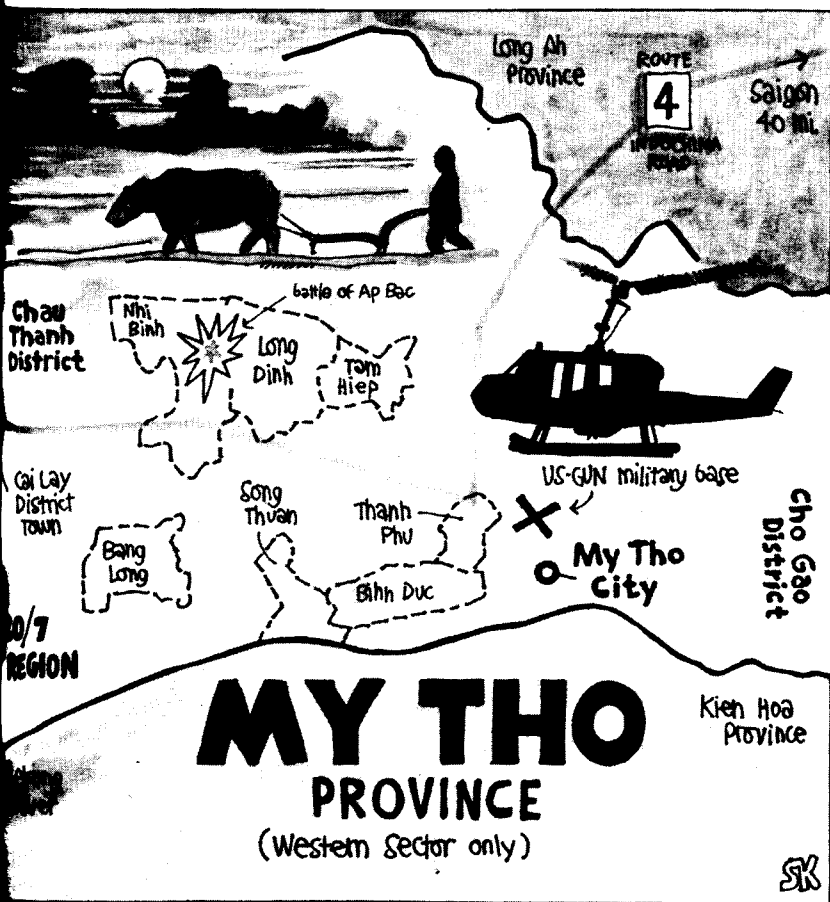
The RAND transcripts miss all of this preparation. For the most part consisting of the testimony of defectors, who wrongly concluded that the NLF was going to lose the war, these historical sources cannot tell us what we most want to know. Excellent in detailing all the problems faced by the Front, they only glancingly deal with those sources of strength within the NLF which made Tet possible.

The Offensive must have had a profound impact on the villagers of My Tho. For years, the Front had promised a "General Insurrection and General Offensive." The slogan was repeated so many times that it began to lose its force. As refugees reluctantly moved away from their villages, Front cadres had warned them that, in the end, the cities too would be bombed and shelled. At the time, such arguments must have seemed like the desperate threats of a movement which could feel itself going downhill. But in 1968 Front units erupted in the middle of cities like My Tho. "The psychological implications of the attacks are incalculable," wrote Tom Buckley of the New York Times. "For the first time, (city dwellers) found the Vietcong in the streets, shouting their slogans and fighting with nerve-shattering fury against the hastily gathered American and



Vietnamese units sent in to oppose them.” (23)

To save themselves from total defeat, US-GVN soldiers turned their guns against the cities, large portions of which were destroyed. For example, one half of My Tho was levelled, according to the estimate of the AP correspondent. (24) After devastating the rural areas for two years, US-GVN firepower was now employed to tear apart those sections of the country which a few days before had seemed to be most firmly under the “control” of the Saigon regime. Front forces withdrew under the bombardment, and their



adversaries naturally claimed this as a “victory.” But if we look at the matter from the point of view of the peasants, we see it in a different light. The self-destructive reaction of US-GVN leaders inadvertently confirmed what the Front had said all along about the course of the war. In spite of its technological superiority, the Saigon dictatorship did not really control any part of the country; in spite of its many losses the Front still had the power to carry the war where it pleased.

In 1968, the Front might reasonably have hoped that its

demonstration of strength would persuade the United States to withdraw from Vietnam. Firmly entrenched throughout the Mekong Delta, which had been almost entirely liberated from Saigon control, cadres carried on their political work more openly than at any time since 1965. We have no interviews for the period after 1968 with which to measure reactions in the countryside to the new American escalation engineered by the Nixon administration, but I think we can assume that events followed a familiar course. Once again, massive bombardment generated refugees, and forced the NLF onto the defensive, and again, in 1972, a large scale offensive was needed to demonstrate that the insurgents were still strong. This time the U.S. decided to come to terms.

We know that since the signing of the Paris Agreements in January 1973, fighting between NLF and GVN forces has continued. Specific news about the My Tho area, however, is hard to come by. The Province has been a major battlefield in the "rice war" which occasionally is mentioned by one of the wire services. On August 30, 1973, for example, AP quoted "military sources" in Saigon to the effect that the "Communists aimed" to cut Route 4, the main highway through the delta to Saigon. "The drive now is centering on the districts of Cai Be and Cai Lay, areas of traditional Vietcong control in Dinh Tuong Province in the northern delta." Apparently the cadres in My Tho are still determined to win "the Indochina Road." A UPI dispatch, dated December 18, 1973, describes "fierce fighting... in the outskirts of the district towns of Cai Lay... and Cai Be." Saigon sources claimed the attackers left behind 97 dead, not necessarily a figure to be taken seriously, but at least one which suggests that a battle between fairly large size units had taken place. The cryptic account tells us perhaps more than the Saigon source intended. If the Front can concentrate significant armed forces on the "outskirts" of the district capitals, it must be in a strong position, with freedom to move around in the countryside, and with the Saigon authorities bottled up in a handful of strongholds isolated here and there in the Province.

Recent newspaper reporting on Vietnam did involve one special bonus for those interested in My Tho. Right after

the signing of the January agreement, a number of western journalists were able to travel in liberated areas of the Province. (25) Le Monde's Jean-Claude Pomonti visited the 20/7 heartland of the NLF between Route 4 and the Mekong River, twenty kilometers west of My Tho City (around Bang Long). The French correspondent found large political meetings taking place, while Front schools were being rebuilt and its entertainment troupe was "constantly on the move" from village to village. Véronique Decoudu (Agence France Presse) and Jacques Leslie (Los Angeles Times) also toured the 20/7 area, beginning in the Village of Binh Phu, somewhat to the west of the region explored by Pomonti. They attended a show put on by an NLF troupe where, according to Decoudu, "the atmosphere was enthusiastic," and 6,000 spectators were still absorbed in the spectacle after midnight when the visitors had to leave. Six thousand spectators! And this in an area where several years ago groups of five to ten people were dispersed by bombs and shells. Preventing villagers from joining together in groups was precisely the aim of U.S. escalation. Large assemblies of peasants indicate far better than any more narrowly military development the continuing vitality of the NLF.

Right at home in communities of real people, with their own past, present and future, cadres thus continue the work of the NLF. Pomonti recorded the remarks of his seventeen-year-old guide: "With Uncle Ho, people were happy. Around Uncle Ho, people felt good. What a shame he couldn't hold on till the peace!" The words reminded me that Ho Chi Minh's name has a special meaning in the interview transcripts. Respondents thought of him when trying to come to terms with the reality of a protracted war. According to a POW,

As Uncle Ho said, the Front soldiers would have to fight a long-term war. As the bamboo trees wither and bamboo sprouts spring up year after year, the Front will continue to fight, and it will fight until there are no Americans left in the South. Then we will have national reunification.

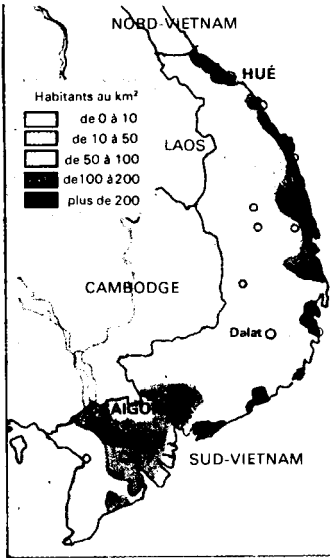
Another respondent repeated the following remarks from a military cadre :

At present, we are similar to the farmers who start to plant their crops. They have to endure the lack of their families' affection and temporary insufficiency of food. But when the rice is ripe, harvested and brought home, they will have plenty for their expenditures and they will joyfully unite with their families. Chairman Ho has resolved to make slight his family's affections. He took refuge in foreign countries and lacked food and clothing. He was also tyrannically tortured by capitalists. Even so, he has patiently maintained his revolutionary standpoint. Therefore, at present, we must follow President Ho's bright example. We must sacrifice our families' affections and resolve to bring victory to our people.

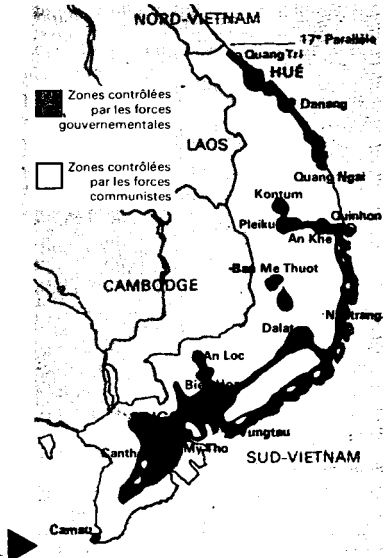
"If he speaks in these familiar terms of Ho Chi Minh" noted Pomonti of his guide, "it is not by accident. In his hamlet, the memory of the 'Uncle' of Vietnam is still alive, even among the youngest."

"I am a son of the revolution," affirmed one cadre during a talk with Pomonti. "With hollow cheeks and an intense gaze, a dry manner and a calm voice," the speaker appeared to the French journalist to be "a kind of Saint Just whose authority imposed itself from the start." "I was born in the revolution," the cadre continued, "I've lived in it, I grew up in it, I've been nourished by it. It's my life, my upbringing, my experience. What I've learned, I've learned from the people."

As the interview went on, the audience never stopped growing, and the hut seemed to be surrounded by about fifty pairs of eyes and ears, mostly young partisans. Two journalists of the NLF took careful notes, while the host, an old peasant, passed around little glasses of tea.



Population Density per Sq. KM



Relation of Forces at Cease Fire
(L'Express / Intercontinental Press)

RAND AND THE NLF

The RAND Corporation went to Vietnam in 1964 as part of the American war making apparatus. Since the money for staff members' salaries came from the Department of Defense, its interviewers and consultants were in effect employees of the Pentagon. RAND's client status must be stressed because, in the wake of its withdrawal from Vietnam, the Corporation has attempted to portray itself as an independent research organization which studied the NLF for purely scholarly purposes. The "User's Guide" to the transcripts, written by RAND consultant W. Phillips Davison, presents us with a picture of dedicated researchers seeking out the truth in spite of the often obtuse interfer-

ence of US-GVN authorities. "Few Vietnamese or American officials in Saigon every really understood the purpose of the project," writes Davison. "Most of them seem to have regarded it as an intelligence-gathering undertaking rather than a long-range study of political, social, and psychological factors." Given the fact that the Pentagon was paying the bills, such assumptions were not unreasonable. "We got the best damn intelligence in the war!" boasted RAND consultant Leon Goure in the early days of U. S. direct intervention. (26) As we will see, the interview schedule used by RAND was clearly designed, at least in part, to gather military intelligence.

RAND's Vietnam enterprise, in other words, is the very model of a dishonest research project. The reality was that the Corporation worked for the U. S. Government, and its staffers by necessity cooperated closely with American and Saigon military personnel, whose good will was essential in day-to-day operations. RAND consultants were given military titles. For example, J. J. Zasloff, the first RAND "scholar" in Vietnam, was made a general. But in their work, RAND staffers systematically attempted to hide the fact that they were employees of the Pentagon. Here is Davison's description:

The interviewers were coached to introduce themselves to respondents as persons studying the social, economic, and political situation in Vietnam, in order to understand the National Liberation Front and its position vis-a-vis the government of Vietnam.... When pressed as to the exact auspices of the project, the interviewers usually described in general terms a research organization under contract to the government.

Davison also cites the recollections of a Vietnamese interviewer who stated that "some interviewers claimed that they were reporters," while "still others posed as social science students doing research for their oncoming theses." (27)

In one sense, these lies were unavailing. As some of the

interviewers discovered, respondents held to their correct assumption that, in Davison's words, "the interviewer has some connection with either Vietnamese or American authorities." On the other hand, the attempted deception did serve one useful purpose. When RAND first arrived in Vietnam, the Saigon government was reluctant for political reasons to permit U.S. military personnel free access to NLF defectors and POWs. Such contact would emphasize the American presence in Vietnam and bring out the client status of the GVN. From the point of view of Saigon authorities, RAND proved to be a good intermediary. As David Landau explains :

While RAND, which had been set up by the Air Force in 1947 and had depended entirely on official subsidies ever since was effectively a government agency, it nonetheless drifted in the half world of consulting and "management" firms and managed to preserve the aura, if not the reality, of political and intellectual independence. (28)

Under the cloak of non-partisanship, RAND talked to prisoners and defectors, then handed over useful information to US-GVN military officials. In this way, it was hoped, RAND's mythical neutrality would lend credence to the equally mythical independence of the Saigon regime. Puppets of the world, unite !

As for the transcripts themselves, intelligence considerations are manifest throughout. The interviewers ask many questions about NLF reaction to different U.S. military tactics. They try to pin down in minute detail the routines of Main and Local Force units. They ask for information on how the NLF planned to counter U.S. pacification drives. They go on for page after page in search of information on the names, whereabouts and activities of NLF local cadres. They show great interest in the process of defection, asking what defectors thought of Chieu Hoi leaflets, how they reacted to loudspeaker broadcasts from U.S. helicopters, whether they listened to Saigon radio when they decided to defect, how escape had been arranged, whether other ca-

dres still in NLF territory might be induced to follow in their footsteps. The connection between this information and any "long term study of political, social and psychological factors" is not clear, but the military value of the inquiries seems apparent.

In examining the dynamics of the interview situation, we find that the transcripts are flawed in another way as well. Prisoners of war were routinely tortured before being interviewed, and could look forward to a grim future of imprisonment, further "interrogation" and possible death. The RAND interviews, therefore, did not unfold in neutral circumstances, and indeed GVN police officials were often present during questioning. (29) Defectors were only slightly more able to speak freely. A certain number were in fact NLF spies (the GVN called them "false ralliers"), and Saigon authorities would be watching all "ralliers" closely for signs of residual loyalty to the other side. Some defectors were put through intensive indoctrination sessions before the interviews, and their answers show the imprint of these propaganda barrages. (30) In other words, with both prisoners and defectors, a strong anti-NLF pressure was bound to shape the responses given.

The RAND interviewers brought their own bias to the project. According to the "User's Guide," all the interviewers of known occupation were from the urban middle class. Close to half had a university education, and the others whose educational background is given were graduates of secondary school. Two-thirds were born in North Vietnam, and 30% of those indicating a religious preference were Roman Catholics. On the other hand, the interviewees were almost all peasants, with a few years of primary schooling at most. Only one in 285, a North Vietnamese POW, was born in the North, and Catholics formed a small proportion of the sample. (31) Urban and rural culture in Vietnam are divided by a considerable social gulf, and the interviewers who ventured out into the countryside were like foreigners groping about in an alien country. Davison speaks of these safaris as "field trips" during which the "urban Vietnamese interviewers" and the Americans had to contend with primitive accommodations and uncertain "sanitary facili-

ties and standards of hygiene," in a milieu where "finding a meal that was both safe and palatable" was often a difficult chore. In the later phases of the project, some interviewers took to carrying their own food with them on their trips out of town. On occasion, the teams fell behind schedule and would have to go to considerable trouble to get safely back to Saigon before nightfall. (32)

These details have a political significance. Several of the interviewers saw the NLF as a class organization, uniting poor peasants against the bourgeoisie to which they belonged. Numerous peasant respondents shared this perspective, and as a result the interview situation in some sense brought together two antagonists in class struggle. The number of Northerners among the interviewers also seems significant. Refugees who left the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in 1954 after the Geneva Accords have provided the backbone of U.S.-sponsored right-wing coalitions in the south ever since. The presence of a number of Catholics, traditionally hostile to the resistance, seems to suggest the same kind of political bias. On the face of it, the interviewers come from groups predisposed to take a hostile position toward the NLF.

The transcripts confirm this expectation. In their post-scripts to the interviews, and in the way they ask questions, many of the interviewers betray a strong anti-NLF prejudice. One spoke of the "Front's unreasonableness and imbecility." Another noted that his subject, a POW, "wanted to conceal his ideas, but he could not conceal them for long. He has been deeply indoctrinated with atheist materialism. However, he still loves his family." Suspicion of the NLF was balanced by solidarity with the Saigon regime. An interviewer suggested that one respondent, a defector, "became less skeptical and more confident (in our cause)" in the course of the interview. "The subject was deeply indoctrinated," another observed, in speaking of a POW, "and he was not sincere or cooperative with the interviewer. If the subject were released now, he would join the VC to fight against us. That was what he had in mind, unless we could change it by giving him a good brain-wash in prison." (33)

In this excerpt and in others, we see that a number of interviewers saw their role in para-military terms. Many

acted like interrogators, probing for hidden subversive leanings; see the above example of the interviewee who "wanted to conceal his ideas, but he could not conceal them for long." Here is the postscript for another interview, in which the respondent, a POW, had forthrightly outlined the principles which motivated him to serve the NLF :

The subject was not sincere at all. He tried to avoid answering the questions of the interviewer to the point. He refused to reveal anything about the high ranking cadres who he certainly knew. He liked to express his views boldly, and seemed to want to make propaganda for the Front. But he revealed his thoughts and showed that he was a hard core Front cadre.

Others used the interviews as a vehicle for GVN propaganda. After discussion with a POW who had been tortured, an interviewer stated :

The subject was very cooperative and sincere. He agreed with the interviewer that his being beaten up by ARVN soldiers was simply an uncontrolled incident which occurred in a hot spot. He also agreed that the way the Front had drafted him away was inhuman.

Another interviewer described how he "tried to summarily explain to (his subject) the American aims in Vietnam and drew a map of southeast Asia to help him to understand." (34)

Time and again, the interviewers press for anti-NLF views. Often the phrasing of questions is designed to compel a certain response. "In your opinion," asks one interviewer of a POW, "were those totalitarian methods of leadership of the party good and correct?" "Why is killing such a trifle to the NLF?" demanded another. Occasionally, interviewers lose their composure and simply quarrel with their subjects. Here is one question from discussion with a defector.

Why were the people glad when China or the Soviet

Union gave aid to North Vietnam, as you just said, and regarded them as good friends, but when the U.S. and other nations of the free world gives aid to the GVN which is about a hundred times that given to Hanoi by China and Russia, they said that the Americans were invaders ?

Such outbursts are usually informative. This one, for example, tells us that the interviewer regards as an enemy not just the NLF, but "the people" as a whole, with their obstinate mistrust of the "free world." At times these arguments have an ugly, vindictive edge. One POW was asked :

In the future, where will the NLF cadres go if there are no people in their areas ? Will you depart for North Vietnam and live there with Mr. Ho ? As a matter of fact, if you don't come over to the GVN side, you will have no people to support you.

Other interviewers show more restraint, and a number of interviews are developed in an intelligent and dispassionate manner. But the overall political atmosphere in which these exchanges take place is unmistakable. None of the interviewers show a pro-NLF bias, and statements favorable to the GVN are seldom challenged. Even if the interviewers had been sympathetic to the insurgents, the conditions of their employment discouraged candor. They were, after all, working for one of the parties in the war, and pulling down a handsome salary in the process ("comparable to what they would have received in the top ranks of the Vietnamese civil service," according to the "User's Guide"). (35)

In attempting to promote the historical objectivity of the transcripts, Davison affirms that "the existence of several very different political biases among the group (of interviewers) even though all were non-Communists, probably serves to offset bias in the interviews as a whole." This puzzling statement can be explained by the fact that Davison shares the ideological predispositions of the people whose objectivity he is attempting to measure. He is not particularly struck by their prejudices because he himself

looks at things in a similarly one-sided way. He thinks the dictates of political objectivity have been satisfied, while recognizing that all the interviewers are "non-Communist" (meaning in this context "non-NLF"), because he takes it for granted that "Communist" views are beyond the pale and do not deserve to be included within the framework of scholarly inquiry. Clearly, no one could reasonably expect RAND to make a practice of employing people who were not "non-Communist"! In a similar vein, Davison argues, "The fact that all the interviewers were Vietnamese nationalists" assured that they would not be content simply to tell the Americans what they wanted to hear about the NLF. "Devotion to their country," he asserts, "probably moved interviewers to represent conditions as accurately as possible." (36) Some of the interviewers, and of course Saigon authorities, call the GVN the "nationalist" party in the war. But the usage is so questionable that it has been avoided even in the American press. As a foreigner in Vietnam, Davison identifies the nationalists as those who express "devotion to their country" by agreeing to join him in working for a military establishment which at that moment was busy killing thousands of Vietnamese people. His judgment, and RAND's as well, of what constitutes an objective study of the National Liberation Front does not deserve to be taken seriously.

The transcripts suffer from a number of other defects. First, an attempt has been made to remove all names of people and places, ostensibly in the interests of protecting the respondents from future reprisal. With a bold cynicism, these Pentagon-financed consultants affirm that "Researchers have an ethical responsibility to ensure that no one suffers from having been a subject of research." (37) On the other hand, studies published by RAND consultants often reveal these names and places, while careless editing has left a few identifying details still legible in the transcripts. Although anonymity has by no means been uniformly maintained, the general policy of eliminating such detail causes considerable inconvenience for the reader.

More serious, information on American and GVN atrocities has been removed from the text. Davison concedes, "One team leader reported that he occasionally cut material

having to do with mistreatment of prisoners, in order not to jeopardize access to certain police and military installations, but that does not seem to have been a general practice." The reason given for deletions makes sense, and readers may wonder how other team leaders avoided the need to edit transcripts in order to stay on the good side of US-GVN officials. On the same subject, Anthony Russo has written :

Material on torture of prisoners or brutal treatment of civilians by Americans, Koreans, or Saigon troops was removed when the interviews were being typed up in Saigon. The policy, set by Goure, was the subject of bitter disagreement between him and me; I would never remove any material from interviews that went through my hands, nor would several others; but most complied with Goure's censorship policies. (38)

For these reasons, the transcripts cannot be considered fully accurate sources on American activity in Vietnam.

When considered altogether, these various factors limit the value of the transcripts as historical sources. Two hundred forty two of the respondents are defectors, and not surprisingly they tend to stress the shortcomings of the NLF. At the same time, reports from the 43 POWs are not that different in tone from those of the defectors. In fact, some try to convince their interrogators that they were just about to desert before being captured and therefore should really be counted as "ralliers." (39) The generally mixed picture of the NLF which we get from the transcripts might be a reflection of the real situation, but we cannot draw such a conclusion given the fact that the bias of the information gathering situation was so marked. Both defectors and POWs had no good reason for speaking well of the NLF and many which encouraged a negative report. In some respects, "defectors" and "POWs" are not the best categories for dividing up the respondents. The group might be more meaningfully split between the witnesses who discuss in some detail the activities of the NLF, and the interviewees who offer only cursory testimony. Usually, the

Front's "line and policy" tends to seem more complex, realistic and attractive in the longer and more thorough interviews, involving both defectors and POWs. But all too often, for reasons which by now should be clear, the interviewers are content with pat anti-NLF comments, and do not press their subjects for further information.

The RAND materials are thus well suited to answer certain kinds of questions, but not very helpful at all in dealing with others. For example, the reader quickly discovers that a credible picture of NLF strengths is not easily extracted from the transcripts. If we took them at face value, we would assume that in 1967 the Front was falling apart, losing public support and helplessly giving ground before adversaries who were on the verge of winning a military victory. This picture is inaccurate, as we know from subsequent history, but it is what we would expect from defectors who had decided the NLF was doomed and had escaped from an apparently sinking ship by joining the GVN side. Many of the defectors are well informed, but their observations are distorted by this fundamental miscalculation. Jumping to the conclusion that the Front was finished, they overlooked those strong points which enabled the insurgents to stage the Tet Offensive and to keep fighting for years afterward.

Along the same lines, the transcripts do not, and cannot, tell us the full story of Saigon rule in the countryside or the impact of U.S. military intervention on Vietnamese society. Interviewees speak with some candor of their hatred of Diemism. After all, the dictator Thieu himself had been a member of the military junta which usurped power from Diem in 1963. But they are not asked, and they do not volunteer, any opinion of later Saigon governments. As Davison explains, need for the "cooperation of Vietnamese and American authorities" dictated that "questions could not be asked about South Vietnamese politics." (40) Similar concerns prevented interviewers from probing very energetically for villagers' attitudes toward the United States. In any case, as we have seen, negative information which was uncovered tended to be censored out of the transcripts.

One of the topics the interviews do cover, and in priceless detail, is the array of difficulties encountered by the

NLF. The way cadres solved problems is not fully documented and must often be inferred from the more lengthy and thoughtful interviews. Instead defectors dwell on the Front's weaknesses, and interviewers are happy to encourage such reports. The result is that we are presented with a comprehensive picture of all the different kinds of problems which came up as the Front responded to American escalation. Rather than trying to make the transcripts perform a function for which they are not well suited, I have followed the RAND sources in stressing this side of NLF history. The perspective is not without value. We gain a special appreciation of the Front as we observe it confronting, and surmounting, obstacles which would have stymied a less cohesive political movement.

FOOTNOTES

Bob Purdy helped me a great deal with the final version of the paper. I want to thank him, as well as Steve Karaian, who drew the map; and also the following people, for their suggestions and criticisms of earlier drafts: Feroz Ahmad, Herbert Bix, Paul Faler, Jim Green, Jim Hunt, Allen Hunter, Jim Kaplan, Esther Kingston-Mann and Henry Norr. I am especially grateful to Linda Gordon and Peter Weiler. Their firm attachment to the NLF has meant a lot to me — I wouldn't have dared to undertake this project without their support.

(1) A cadre is an official exercising responsibility in one of the NLF's local organizations.

(2) For a general description of the Rand project, see W. Phillips Davison, "User's Guide to the Rand Interviews in Vietnam" (Santa Monica, 1972), published by the RAND Corporation. Excellent critical discussion of RAND's Vietnam work is found in David Landau, "The Viet Cong Motivation and Morale Project," and Anthony Russo, "Looking

Backward: Rand and Vietnam in Retrospect," both in Ram-
parts (November, 1972).

A word on terminology. Saigon authorities speak of "Dinh Tuong" Province, and the name is used by American officials and journalists, and by RAND as well. But the NLF calls this area, along with neighboring "Go Cong," My Tho Province, after the Capital City of My Tho. District boundaries and village names also may vary, depending on whose maps are consulted. Throughout the paper, when I am aware of contrasting terminology, I have chosen to employ the vocabulary of the NLF, for reasons which I hope will become clear in the Chapter on "Village Politics." According to one RAND study, "In clinging to the French province names, the Viet Cong would appear to be the more practical nationalists. Several generations of Dinh Tuong peasants have grown up thinking of their province as 'My Tho.'" David Elliott and W. A. Stewart, "Pacification and the Viet Cong System in Dinh Tuong: 1966-1967" (Santa Monica, 1969), 7 FT.

(3) I have transcribed passages from the "DT" series just as they appear in the original, complete with misspellings, grammatical errors and clumsy phrasing. No attempt has been made to signal when inclusion of such mistakes has been deliberate. Putting in a "sic" for each of the dozens of errors, it seemed to me, would only add to the distraction for readers already bothered by the mistakes themselves. Readers should keep this in mind when they encounter words like "majestuously" and "proseltying" in the paper.

Pairs of numbers separated by a slash are references to the "DT" series. The first number refers to the interview, the second, to the question within the interview. For example, this quote is from interview #250, question #27: 250/27. Because of space limitations, I have not included in this set of footnotes most of the references to transcript passages referred to in the text. Readers interested in a complete set of footnotes should write to Radical America for a copy.

(4) See the description of this battle in Wilfred Burchett, Vietnam: Inside Story of the Guerrilla War (New York, 1968), 85ff.

(5) There is a good discussion of this issue of "upward mobility" within the NLF in Jeffrey Race, War Comes to Long An: Revolutionary Conflict in a Vietnamese Province (Berkeley, 1973), 167ff.

(6) "Living integrated with the enemy" is discussed in Burchett, Inside Story, 59ff.

(7) Robert Sansom, The Economics of Insurgency in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam (Cambridge, Mass., 1970), 65.

(8) The Vietnamese phrase hoc tap is translated as "political indoctrination" by RAND — see 49/33, for example — when "study" is really the more appropriate term. RAND translators sometimes disagree about this matter; note references to "indoctrination sessions" in some interviews, "study sessions" in others.

(9) Later on, these tactics played a more direct military role. For example, when Saigon troops passed through a village, the peasants beat on their wooden fish. Guerrillas were almost impossible to trap because, when GVN forces attempted to encircle them, they simply headed in a direction where no noise-making could be heard. See 159/60 for an example.

(10) When Wilfred Burchett first published accounts of Diem atrocities, he was criticized by American observers sympathetic to the Saigon regime. Burchett, Vietnam Will Win! (New York, 1970), 49. But the transcripts corroborate Burchett's grim picture of Diem's rule. See, for example, the long discussion with interviewee #135, a defector, and one of the most authoritative respondents in the whole series. Long patronized by American scholars and journalists as a "Communist," and therefore a hopelessly biased observer of the NLF, Burchett's description of the insurgency is borne out again and again, even down to minor details, by evidence from the transcripts. Note, for example, the respondents' references to "mother carbine" incidents, first analyzed in Inside Story, 109ff.

(11) Sansom devotes only a page to bombing and shelling, which, he recognizes, "threatened to push the issue of land reform, technology, Viet Cong taxes, and everything else into the background." The Economics of Insurgency, 240.

(12) The most notorious proponent of this view is Samuel

Huntington, "The Bases of Accommodation," Foreign Affairs (July, 1968).

(13) NLF regular forces did fight some major battles during this period. For example, see John Albright, "Fight Along the Rach Ba Rai," John Albright et al., Seven Fire-fights in Vietnam (Washington, 1970), 67-84.

(14) These fortifications look quite different if we simply switch over to view them from the invaders' perspective: "My Lai 1 was screened by a thick hedge and heavily guarded by booby traps. Within minutes one of the mines hidden in the hedge line was tripped and the men of Bravo Company heard screams. Lieutenant Cochran was killed and four GIs seriously injured in the explosion.... Another booby trap was tripped; once more there were screams and smoke. This time three second platoon GIs were injured and the unit was in disarray. The surviving GIs insisted that they were not going to continue the mission, and said as much to Captain Michles. Colonel Barker flew in himself to see to the evacuation of the wounded, and then made an amazing decision; rather than call on the first or third platoon to complete the mission, he simply canceled Bravo Company's order to search and destroy My Lai 1." Later that day, Bravo Company murdered scores of peasants in neighboring My Khe 4. Meanwhile, in the more publicized incident, "Charlie Company," also under Colonel Barker's command, was massacring Vietnamese in My Lai 4. Seymour Hersh, Cover-Up (New York, 1972), 13.

(15) "Face-to-face struggles" are discussed in Burchett, Inside Story, 62ff. He notes that during the Diem administration, "It was difficult for the police and local authorities to be too brutal with demonstrators who all claimed they were loyal supporters of the government and only came so that the government should know what was being done in its name in the countryside. And as high authorities of the government could not admit that atrocities were authorized in its name, the demonstrators had a useful weapon to take back with them in their arguments with local authorities." Inside Story, 67.

(16) This example shows the close interdependence between political and military activities of the NLF. Ideally, the Front counted on guerrillas to keep Saigon troops on the

defensive, leaving its regular units free to strike where they pleased. When military forces functioned in this way, enemy soldiers stayed close to their bases, and local cadres could operate freely in the villages. Their activities led to the mobilization of more recruits and taxes, thus strengthening military forces, which in turn were even more able to protect liberated territory from hostile incursions. But bombing and shelling tended to reverse this process. When people fled their villages, taxes and recruits were hard to come by, and big NLF units suffered accordingly. In any case, they could not easily venture into areas which were being intensively bombarded. As a result, the mobility of ARVN forces was augmented by bombing and shelling, and, left on their own, guerrilla squads could not prevent them from penetrating many areas. In such circumstances, without a military shield, local cadres found it impossible to carry on with their work. The complex inter-relationship of politics and military affairs, and among the various Front military units, is discussed in the excellent article by Elliott and Stewart, "Pacification and the Viet Cong System in Dinh Tuong."

(17) The political weakness of Saigon's defector program was summarized this way by a POW: "When reading the Chieu Hoi leaflets, I experienced a mixed feeling of disbelief and apprehension. I felt that the war being waged in South Vietnam was not the business of an individual, but of an entire people. Therefore, peace can only be achieved when the leaders of both participants in the war agree to sit down and negotiate. I hardly believed that peace could be obtained through the conversion of cause of any lone individual." 142/189. With their meager understanding of the reasons why people joined the NLF, Saigon authorities did indeed conceptualize defection as a form of "conversion," in which cadres were persuaded to turn away from Communist blandishments. To them, the defector was a "rallier" who had come back to the true faith.

These thoughts from Bernard Fall further help to put the Chieu Hoi program in perspective: "...In Vietnam during 1966 a total of 20,242 Chieu-Hoi ('Open Arms' defectors) came out of the jungle, bringing with them a total of only 1,963 weapons — i.e. most of these defectors were unarmed

civilians....Meanwhile the South Vietnamese Army lost, that same year, at least 110,000 men, who simply walked off and out of the war." "The View from Vietnam," New York Review of Books (February 9, 1967), cited in In the Name of America (Annandale, Virginia, 1968), 351.

(18) The draft seems to have been reinstated in late 1967, apparently in conjunction with planning for the Tet Offensive. As in 1964-1965, the move was part of a major effort which, it was hoped, would end the war. See 285/18, 288/19, 289/33.

(19) The phrase is Wilfred Burchett's. See his discussion in Vietnam Will Win, 115ff.

(20) Contrasting land policies of the Saigon regime on the one side, and the Viet Minh and NLF on the other, are discussed in Sansom, The Economics of Insurgency. Many interview respondents corroborate Sansom's findings.

(21) For another discussion of this subject, see Frances Fitzgerald, Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam (New York, 1973), 220ff.

(22) This interview is particularly valuable because in general the "DT" series is short on female respondents. Only nine of the defectors and three of the POWs are women. Other informative women interviewees are #65, a POW, #182, a defector, but, in the words of her interviewer, "a great fan of the VC," and #253, a defector.

(23) New York Times, February 4, 1968.

(24) Ibid., February 6, 1968. The dispatch read in part: "To stop the enemy troops, the allied forces had to attack them in the positions they had taken in homes and other buildings. It was a necessity of war. But the looks that the people of Mytho gave the Americans today appeared to be angry." The correspondent offered an estimate of 750 civilian casualties in My Tho as a result of the fighting.

Ben Tre, Capital City of neighboring Kien Hoa Province, was brought to the attention of American readers by another paragraph in this same dispatch. "It became necessary to destroy the town to save it," a U.S. Major was quoted as saying. "The VC had people all over this town," noted Major Phillip Canella of Ben Tre; "Christ, they were everywhere."

(25) Jean-Claude Pomonti, "Dans la zone du G. R. P."

("In the PRG Zone"), and "Chez les partisans du G. R. P." ("With the Partisans of the PRG"), Le Monde, February 7-8, 1973. Véronique Decoudu, "Binh-Phu, village deltaïque, contrôlé par le G. R. P. : Quand six mille paysans assistent à un spectacle de danses dans une atmosphère de réconciliation nationale" ("Binh Phu, Delta village controlled by the PRG : When six thousand peasants attend a dance show in an atmosphere of national reconciliation"), Le Monde, February 3, 1973. Jacques Leslie, "Exclusive Report : A Day Inside a Viet Cong Stronghold," Los Angeles Times, February 1, 1973.

(26) Davison's observation is in "User's Guide," 27. The remark by Goure is cited by Anthony Russo, "Looking Backward," 57. My analysis of the RAND project is much indebted to the Russo article, and also to David Landau's essay in the same issue of Ramparts.

(27) Landau discusses Zasloff's rank in "The Viet Cong Motivation and Morale Project," 32. The remarks about RAND staffers' hidden affiliations are in Davison, "User's Guide," 32-33.

To be fair, we should note that the first RAND team in Vietnam produced some of the best studies to come out of the project. See J. C. Donnell, G. J. Pauker, J. J. Zasloff, "Viet Cong Motivation and Morale : A Preliminary Report" (Santa Monica, 1965). This study, sympathetic to the NLF, came out at a particularly awkward moment. "If what you say is correct, then we have joined the wrong side," noted Assistant Secretary of Defense John McNaughton after reading the report. Cited in Landau, "The Viet Cong Motivation and Morale Project," 33. Committed to escalating the war, U.S. planners chose to ignore Zasloff's findings.

No discussion of the RAND project would be complete without a mention of its most impressive results, the truly inspiring reports of Konrad Kellen, "A View of the VC : Elements of Cohesion in the Enemy Camp in 1966-1967" (Santa Monica, 1969), "Conversations with Enemy Soldiers in Late 1968/Early 1969 : A Study of Motivation and Morale" (Santa Monica, 1970) and "1971 and Beyond : The View from Hanoi" (Santa Monica, 1971).

(28) Davison's remark on relations with US-GVN author-

ities is in "User's Guide," 32. The interviewer of subject #208 noted that, "He mistook the interviewer for a GVN official, even though the interviewer had done his best to explain the purpose of the interview to him." Landau's comment is in "The Viet Cong Motivation and Morale Project," 31.

(29) Russo: "Virtually every prisoner was tortured Prisoners were tortured as a matter of course, even those who tried their best to be cooperative. "Looking Backward," 54, 56. Davison: "Many prisoners had been mishandled or even tortured during earlier interrogation sessions, and some defectors had been treated roughly, or at least without respect." "User's Guide," 33-34. One POW among the respondents reported that he was tortured "like the rest of the POWs." 142/189. Another indicated that he had been "beaten up savagely." 239/83. The 86-year-old woman POW was also beaten. As her interviewer noted: "Mrs. XXXXX, 86-years-old, was very sick, tired, and unable to sit up I don't understand why the Special Forces arrested and tortured such an old lady." 264/interviewer's comment. See also 49/40, 213/43, 272/3. For police presence during interviews, see 57/interviewer's comment, 144/19. Davison suggests the possibility that interviewing rooms were bugged, in "User's Guide," 30.

(30) See Russo's discussion of the Chieu Hoi program as a "rest and relaxation program for the V.C.," in "Looking Backward," 55. For an example of a "false rallier," note interview #87. Jacques Doyon writes that according to the CIA 7-10% of the deserters eventually returned to the NLF. He also provides a vivid sketch of the My Tho Chieu Hoi Center. "The My Tho camp was pitiable. For the first time, a water tank on wheels from the army had been obtained. Before, it was necessary to boil the filthy water from the irrigation canals. A dirty, shabby building, a cramped dormitory of thirty to forty beds, tents where the deserters sleep or daydream. A painful atmosphere of idleness, boredom, neglect. Men hang around, while at the camp gate the interrogations go on non-stop." Les Viet Cong Paris, 1968, 257, 259.

Here are impressions from another French observer, on Saigon's attempts to educate defectors:

When the head of the Center enters one of the conference rooms, he shouts, "Let me introduce a friend, stand up!" The ralliers stand up in unison, clap their hands "with force and enthusiasm" (comments my guide) and shout: "Welcome."

To relax them or put them in the mood, one of the instructors orders his proteges-prisoners to beat out the rhythm of the "Fantastic Ride of the Anti-Communists." The men are seated in a circle. Hands flat on the table, they listen to their mentor chant in rhythm: "One, two, cavalry of Vietnam, one, two." On the words one, two, the men strike the table first with their right hands, then with their left, and then with both at once. After the hands, the feet, the right, then the left, striking the floor. After the feet, in turn heads shake. Finally their whole bodies participate in this bizarre dance which ends with a chant, taken up together by master and pupils:

"Forward, forward, have courage. Life is rosy. A fresh wind is blowing. Don't hesitate, don't be afraid of anything, one, two. Don't wander, for fear of losing your vigor, one, two."

The rhythm accelerates as the song approaches its end. Faces are streaming with sweat and an implausible joy shines in people's eyes. Result of the exercise? or of conviction? In addition, each day the center rings with the sound of the anti-vietcong hymn, designed, as was gravely explained to me, to condition minds in the proper spirit.

Sample lyrics: "Today I have broken with the Vietcong, my life begins to smell perfume from all sides," etc. Fernand Gigon, Les Américains face au vietcong (Paris, 1965), 195ff.

(31) Occupations: Secretarial or clerical, 3; Professional, 14; Business, 3; Government Service, 2; South Vietnamese Army, 6; Student, 3; No data, 5. Education: Secondary School, 5; University, 16; No data, 15. Place of Birth: North Vietnam, 22; South Vietnam, 5; Central Vietnam, 6; Cambodia, 1; No data, 2. Religion: Roman Catholic, 7; Vietnamese traditional (mainly Buddhist), 14; Protestant, 2;

No data, 13. See chart in "User's Guide," 16. By contrast, a villager who reached the "first grade" of elementary school (the fifth, and last, year of elementary school) described himself as "relatively well educated." 1/31. Only one respondent, a POW from the North Vietnamese Army, was born in the North: #287.

(32) Davison, "User's Guide," 24-25. Perhaps significantly, Russo reminisced in an entirely different spirit: "The field trips I took in Vietnam revealed a lot about the war. Everywhere the American advisors seemed hassled, powerless, and isolated from the Vietnamese, as they stuck together in their compounds. I felt much more in touch with the country than most of them because I traveled with Vietnamese, stayed in Vietnamese hotels (which averaged about fifty cents per night before inflation hit), and ate in Vietnamese restaurants. The food was delicious; I had never dreamed there were so many varieties of rice. Usually, after we arrived in a place, I would leave the Vietnamese to the interviewing and explore the area, talking to village and hamlet officials and going out into the countryside whenever possible." "Looking Backward," 55.

(33) The four observations cited in this paragraph are found in the interviewer's comment for interviews 45, 161, 171, and 230. The subject of the second of these interviews had been asked: "Do you think that there is an afterlife?" He answered: "In my opinion, I cannot understand what I am unable to see with my own eyes. Whether a man has a soul or not, I cannot see it, so I am not confident in its existence. Death puts an end to everything" — hence his "atheist materialism." He also stated: "I have not joined the Communist Party because I did not carry out my duties actively. I don't want to join it because I still love my family." 161/26, 12.

(34) These three remarks are found in interviewer's comments for interviews 159, 272, and 15.

(35) The four interview exchanges mentioned in this paragraph are found in 157/60, 159/11, 140/40, 195/92. On salaries, Davison, "User's Guide," 14. When asked about totalitarian methods, subject #159, a POW, stated: "...I don't think they were totalitarian because the Party forbade all forms of totalitarianism. Everything was decided upon

by everyone in the Party Chapter, and everything was carried out collectively. When I was not a member, I didn't find any totalitarianism either, because the directives or orders from above were carried out well for the good of everyone concerned." A moment later he suggested that the Diem government was a much better example of totalitarianism. 157/62.

(36) Davison, "User's Guide," 21-22.

(37) Ibid., iii.

(38) Ibid., 43 ft. Russo, "Looking Backward," 57-58.

(39) See, for example, subjects 148 and 209.

(40) Davison, "User's Guide," 7.



CHRONOLOGY OF VIETNAM WAR

1960. At the beginning of the year, the Diem regime seemed firmly entrenched. Its armed forces occupied the countryside, many peasants had been forced off their lands into barbed wire encampments known as agrovilles (later called strategic hamlets or new life hamlets), while local officials and landlords ruled unchallenged in the villages. But during the year, opposition to Diem began to coalesce, as Viet Minh veterans joined with others in armed resistance. On December 20, various dissident groups formed the National Liberation Front.

In My Tho, the Concerted Uprising began when underground cadres quietly made contact with the villagers. Soon, terror was unleashed against the local Saigon apparatus, and villagers were feeling confident enough to attend meetings for study of the line and policy of the new insurgency.

1961. The revolt spread rapidly. Diem appealed to the United States for more aid, and President Kennedy responded, first with contingents of the Special Forces, then with numerous advisors to bolster the Saigon army and administration. Clandestine warfare against the Democratic Republic of Vietnam was also stepped up.

In My Tho, popular associations were set up, and the Front began to develop Local and Main Force military units. Land reform campaign then got underway.

1962. Expanded U. S. aid temporarily checked the NLF advance, with helicopter tactics causing particular problems for the insurgents.

In My Tho, after starting so well, local cadres and guerrillas were thrown into disarray by growing American intervention. But a round of "supplementary reorientation sessions" helped them to reconsolidate morale.

1963. The NLF surged forward throughout the countryside. Rebellion spread to the cities, with the Buddhist peace movement playing a prominent role. In November, the deteriorating situation prompted American leaders to cast Diem aside and to bring in a new Saigon regime.

In My Tho, the NLF won the battle of Ap Bac (January 2).

Organized by village Women's Associations, "face-to-face" political struggle against Saigon authorities was stepped up.

1964. The NLF threatened to expel its enemies completely from the rural areas, while urban cadres agitated openly in the streets of Saigon. A series of coups further disrupted the counter-insurgency effort. Tied down by an election campaign, the Johnson administration secretly planned drastic counter measures.

In My Tho, strategic hamlets and military posts in great numbers were destroyed. The insurgency was stronger than it had been at any time since 1946. Local cadres put in motion a regular system of taxation and universal conscription to mobilize resources needed to finish off the Saigon regime.

1965. To prevent an NLF victory, the U.S. sent troops to South Vietnam and started to bomb the North. After months of instability, the Thieu-Ky regime was installed in Saigon. U.S. and NLF forces collided in a series of bloody, inconclusive battles.

In My Tho, US-GVN authorities began the systematic bombardment of the countryside. Faced with prospects of prolonged war, and temporarily stunned by the bombing and shelling, local cadres organized another round of supplementary reorientation sessions to pull the insurgency together for the next phase of fighting.

1966. Stalemate on the battlefield. The Americans found that they had to pour in more troops just to hold their own. The NLF talked of a long war lasting into the next generation.

In My Tho, bombing and shelling intensified, and US-GVN forces launched pacification drives in key villages, especially to the west of the Province Capital City. Among the insurgents, regular military units withdrew somewhat from combat, while guerrilla tactics received renewed emphasis.

1967. In spite of increasing pressure, the NLF seemed to be holding its own. With victory still not in sight, and troop levels soaring up to the 500,000 level, the United States was plunged into a political crisis. The anti-war movement grew. Within the government, a disenchanted Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara secretly organized the "Pentagon Papers" project.

In My Tho, U.S. troops appeared in January, and pacification measures forced the NLF out of a number of villages. Bombing and shelling generated more refugees, Front military recruiting became impossible in many areas, and its tax receipts dwindled. Casualties and defections thinned the ranks of the cadres, but enough insurgents hung in there to keep the NLF presence alive in most villages.

1968. The NLF stunned the world, and demoralized the Johnson administration, with its powerful Tet Offensive (January 30). Striking simultaneously at over one hundred important targets all over the country, the Front hurled its adversaries back into the cities. President Johnson was forced to resign his office. Gestures from the U.S. conveyed the impression that a negotiated settlement was near.

In My Tho, NLF forces participated in the Tet Offensive with an attack on the Province Capital City.

1969-1971. The newly elected President Nixon chose to continue the war. U.S. ground forces were gradually withdrawn, but bombing and shelling escalated to new heights. Invasions of Cambodia in 1970 and Laos in 1971 extended American military commitments throughout Indochina and touched off giant protests at home. An influx of veterans lent authority to the anti-war movement.

In My Tho, the Front lost ground. More bombing and shelling.

1972. Another major guerrilla offensive. Like Johnson in 1968, Nixon worked to persuade the American people that "peace is at hand."

In My Tho, the offensive enabled NLF forces to liberate a number of villages, including key strongholds in the Front's 20/7 heartland region.

1973. Paris peace agreements signed in January. But after official withdrawal of American presence, the war went on, with survival of the bellicose Thieu regime dependent on massive U.S. aid.

In My Tho, the political strength of the NLF was intact. In the new "rice war," its military units repeatedly threatened to cut the Indochina Road.

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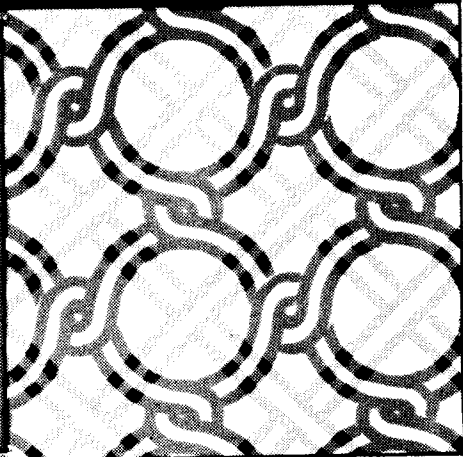
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