

United States Psychological Operations in Support of Counterinsurgency:

Vietnam, 1960 to 1965

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It is early morning on 8 December 1966. A battalion from the United States 1st Infantry Division surrounds the village of Chanh Luu, thirty kilometers north of Saigon. This is part of Operation FAIRFAX, General William Westmoreland's push to clear National Liberation Front (NLF) elements from the area surrounding the capital. Men painstakingly comb the red sand road in search of mines as they approach the village. At eight that morning, field teams of the 246th Psychological Operations (PSYOP) Company, armed with food, PSYOP posters and leaflets, and loudspeakers, enter the formerly Viet Cong (VC) controlled village. The children of the village eagerly swarm around as the Americans distribute candy.

Meanwhile, work begins to remove all traces of communist propaganda from the village. In their place are fresh, colorful posters, and a pro-government slogan is painted on the wall of the only stone building in Chanh Luu. As soldiers visit the village shops, a wizened grandmother crowds the team to get a specially designed calendar. Integral to the PSYOP mission, soldiers assemble the fighting age men of the village for intelligence interviews. Many suspected enemy reside in this village. Some open fire when Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) and American soldiers attempt to apprehend them. The soldiers quickly bring them under control, leaving nine VC dead and several wounded.¹

This minor action in a long war begs several questions. What brought these men to the remote village of Chanh Luu on a bright Tuesday morning, why was this village so heavily contested in a psychological battle, and was the PSYOP effective? Arguably, Vietnam was the

most intensely contested psychological battlefield in history. The war resulted in numerous psychological operations programs by all parties in the war. They utilized countless hours of radio and television, propaganda teams in villages, loudspeaker broadcasts, covert operations, counterpropaganda, and the dispersion of as many as fifty billion leaflets in an area the size of California. Yet, there has been very little research into the effects and effectiveness of these programs. Even a narrative coherently tying together the myriad activities is lacking.²

Beginning with the administration of President Dwight D. Eisenhower through that of President Richard M. Nixon, many in key leadership positions saw PSYOP as an essential element in maintaining influence during the Cold War. A fundamental misunderstanding of PSYOP capabilities frequently led proponents to expect too much from it by believing PSYOP to be a magic bullet that could substitute for an effective strategy. PSYOP alone cannot achieve strategic objectives; at best, it can assist with tactical changes in behavior and support long-term shifts in outlook by the targeted population. Eventual disillusionment, upon realizing these limitations, often led the military to discredit the entire endeavor. Despite this, the U.S. PSYOP program in Vietnam had a great deal of success in many program areas. Between 1960 and 1965, the United States had to improvise and adapt current structures and doctrine to meet this challenge. The American PSYOP advisory effort supported the South Vietnamese at all levels, providing access to training, material support, and critical advice. Yet, instability in the wake of President Ngo Dinh Diem's overthrow impeded the ability of psychological operations to change behaviors and positively affect outcomes.

Vietnam was an economy of force effort for America during the Second World War. The main goals were to protect Allied prisoners in the region and ensure the safety of downed flyers.

In the final months of World War Two, the Office of War Information (OWI) reported dropping leaflets over Hanoi beginning in the summer of 1944. These used a *carrot and stick* theme to encourage humane treatment for downed Allied airmen. These leaflets, printed in Vietnamese on one side and French on the other, were very popular. Despite low literacy, one report stated “those who are unable to read take [the leaflets] to someone who can.” They reportedly sold for one piaster in the bazaar. During the course of the war through May 1945, nearly four million leaflets were dropped on Southeast Asia.³

Upon their return to Vietnam at the end of the war, the French formed Vietnamese psychological operations units as part of their attempt to build a colonial army to defeat the Viet Minh. In order to enhance this program, by the end of 1953 the French sought the advice of America’s premier advocate for PSYOP support to counterinsurgency operations. Edward G. Lansdale, originally a journalist, served in the Office of Strategic Services during World War Two conducting what were termed *Morale Operations*. At the end of the war, he served in the Philippines coordinating operations to defeat the Hukbalahap Rebellion in central Luzon. Later, the Air Force loaned Lansdale to support Central Intelligence Agency missions in Vietnam. Lansdale dominated the conduct of PSYOP in Vietnam for more than a decade from positions in Saigon and Washington. His relationship with Diem was a key factor in maintaining American influence with the South Vietnamese government as well as affecting the views of American leaders.⁴

Under Lansdale’s guidance, the United States assisted in training psychological warfare forces to accomplish this. A hasty instruction program taught soldiers how to enter a village and greet civilians in a respectful manner. Additionally, he built Armed Propaganda Teams. These were 20-man squads trained in psychological warfare, heavily armed and equipped with U.S.

Navy loudhailers, bullhorns, and some larger French voice amplifiers. The men were selected for their patriotic motivation and “carried leaflets, booklets and posters,” and occasionally, phonographs, films, and simple medicines.⁵

Meanwhile, the Viet Minh strategy after 1957 focused on utilizing their own armed propaganda units. The North Vietnamese sanctioned armed struggle to overthrow the Diem government. As a result, assassinations doubled from the eleven per month average, by late 1959. Viet Cong initiated attacks averaged over 100 per month and the ARVN faced a series of setbacks as districts began to fall to communist control.⁶

After Lansdale left Vietnam to become Deputy Assistant to the Secretary Defense for Special Operations, the U.S. Military Assistance and Advisory Group-Vietnam (MAAGV) continued providing assistance in developing South Vietnamese psychological operations units. This included providing advanced training in PSYOP for selected personnel. For instance, in August 1957, the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF) General Staff requested that MAAGV “reserve one place for Vietnam in the study tour program for 1958-1959 to send one field grade officer of the Office of Psychological Warfare” to the United States. The purpose of the visit was study American methods of organization and operations of the Psychological Warfare Branch at Fort Bragg. Training of ARVN officers at Fort Bragg and other locations continued throughout the period.⁷

Lansdale noted that without mobilizing their total resources, the South Vietnamese could do little more than postpone defeat. This mobilization required the assistance of expanded psychological operations. Lansdale saw Diem as the key in this. He argued that, “we must support Ngo Dinh Diem until another strong executive can replace him legally.” He noted that American criticism of Diem’s leadership caused the president to feel isolated and that this led

Diem to withdraw into a shell. In addition, Lansdale encouraged a change of ambassador as well as other personnel in Vietnam because of their perceived inability to work with and influence Diem. In Lansdale's mind, Diem was the indispensable man. As he wrote, "The next time we have become 'holier than thou,' we might find it sobering to reflect on the DRV [North Vietnam]. Do the Soviets and the Chinese Communists give Ho Chi Minh a similar hard time, or do they aid and abet him?"⁸

Lansdale noted that although the NLF had made gains in 1960, they had "neglected doing sound political work at the grass roots level" and that treating the people harshly had created opportunities for psychological exploitation by the South Vietnamese. He discussed this in connection with the recently drafted *Basic Counterinsurgency Plan* for South Vietnam. Lansdale wrote of the need to "foster a spirit of national unity and purpose among all elements of the Vietnamese society [and] strengthen the people's confidence in and respect for the RVNAF as a security force vis-à-vis the VC." He also urged that the United States endeavor to raise South Vietnam's international prestige.⁹

The counterinsurgency plan envisaged intensifying psychological operations to keep the populace informed of what the government of South Vietnam was doing on their behalf, in order to "strengthen their feeling of participation in government and thus their loyalty to it." Among the goals Lansdale set were expanding communications facilities and an improved public relations and strategic communications policy for the Diem government. He also argued for a more robust counterpropaganda program to expose the fallacies of the North Vietnamese program. To support this, the U.S. Army began a PSYOP advisory effort in Vietnam on 27 April 1960 with the deployment of psychological warfare personnel.¹⁰

American involvement in South Vietnamese psychological operations began to grow quickly, especially after the election of John F. Kennedy in 1960. Decision-makers saw PSYOP as an integral part of fighting what Kennedy called ‘brushfire wars’ in the larger ideological struggle between the United States and Soviet Union. Within his first week in office, Kennedy expressed his desire that the Central Intelligence Agency get “guerrillas to operate in the North.” This expanded program was to involve greater use of covert PSYOP against North Vietnam. All this was an indication of the rapid shift in U.S. policy towards Vietnam. At nearly the same time, the North Vietnamese were reevaluating their policy toward the South. On 23 September 1960, the “Party Committee ordered all provinces to launch [a] general uprising.” Later, on 20 December 1960, they formed the National Liberation Front as a branch of the People’s Army of Vietnam (PAVN).¹¹

To Diem, Lansdale urged a more American-style populist leadership approach. “Perhaps the wisest move would be to call in the younger people among the opposition,” he wrote Diem that January. This harkened back to Lansdale’s experience in American journalism and his effort in the Philippines, but did not take into account Vietnamese conceptions of what a leader should do. Diem did carry out some of what Lansdale suggested, but it did not fit well. Despite his often-sage advice, Lansdale was demonstrating a problem of cultural misunderstanding that often encumbered the American PSYOP effort throughout the war. Diem was a “conservative modernizer” whose ideology of ‘personalism’ was poorly understood in the West. He was willing to utilize tools, including PSYOP, but unwilling to accept domination by the United States.¹²

In line with President Kennedy’s desires, the CIA began covert operation in the North. However, like many organizations, the CIA was a victim of its institutional memory. Based on

OSS operations and early Cold War experience, the CIA focused on agent operations. Despite the poor results of teams infiltrating communist controlled areas, this became the standard CIA response to the demand for action. As one officer stated, that was, “the way we do things.” This aspect of the agency’s operations in Vietnam was to have tragic consequences, while the covert PSYOP program it engendered was to have more mixed results.¹³

By 1961, thirty U.S. Information Agency (USIA) personnel were operating in Vietnam. Additionally, they hired Vietnamese representatives for each province to work alongside the Vietnamese Information Service (VIS) personnel. Over the course of the next few years, the USIA budget for Vietnam grew from \$.75 million in 1963 to over \$2.7 million per year in 1968. Much of this was for expanding radio and television infrastructure. Despite these improvements, Lansdale noted the North was “way out in front” in the propaganda battle. Comparing communications capabilities, North Vietnam had eleven radio stations, all based in Hanoi, while the South had twenty-two government owned stations around the country. Despite this, the Hanoi stations reportedly had stronger signals.¹⁴ On 12 May 1962, the CIA Covert Action Station (CAS) in Vietnam reported the black radio station run by the ARVN Psychological Warfare Directorate began broadcasting from the Quang Tri area. This radio station claimed to be an NLF station based in North Vietnam. It was possibly the spurious Viet Cong *Radio Liberation* that CIA Saigon Station Chief William Colby started. This station broadcast on an adjacent frequency to the real NLF sponsored Radio Liberation. It generally sounded like the original, “except for certain false segments that, it was hoped, cast aspersions on the VC in the minds of the listeners.”¹⁵

South Vietnam expanded its PSYWAR force in light of the deteriorating combat situation. On 1 May 1962, the ARVN Joint General Staff activated two more PSYWAR

Battalions. This provided one battalion each for I, II and III Corps Tactical Zones (CTZ). A fourth battalion was added later. Each battalion consisted of three PSYWAR companies.¹⁶

Lansdale discussed creating a national reconciliation program, such as he had organized in the Philippines, with President Diem. This proved to be the forerunner of the successful *Chieu Hoi* (Open Arms) program that President Diem announced in 1963. Chieu Hoi was designed to entice Viet Cong followers to stop supporting the insurgency.¹⁷ In line with this, Diem announced the Chieu Hoi program during Lunar New Year, 1963. To implement this, the ARVN PSYWAR Directorate began publishing a monthly magazine in April 1963, aimed at indoctrinating its soldiers. The magazine, *The Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces*, focused each issue on a specific theme such as “Communism in South Vietnam” or “The People of Vietnam.” The underlying psychological objective of the magazine was to educate soldiers on the Chieu Hoi program and to build support for it. Thus, each issue tabulated the numbers of returnees and weapons turned since the inception of the program. Each also contained the 17 April 1963 proclamation by Diem for all Vietnamese “to return and uphold the just cause of the fatherland and to contribute their efforts along with those of all our people in order to build, in a militant spirit, the new society and civilization where every citizen will be able to develop totally and in full freedom.” Although aimed at the Vietnamese, they also published an English and French language edition.¹⁸

During the summer and fall of 1963, U.S. PSYOP advisors and U.S. Air Force Air Commando aircraft increasingly supported ARVN operations. The major themes continued to be the Chieu Hoi program and surrender appeals. The first operational use of the aerial loudspeaker took place in June 1963. In an effort to remove noncombatants from the battlefield, Montagnard tribesmen in contested areas surrounding the Kon Brai outpost in Kontum Province were

informed that after a certain date “anyone found in the area would be killed.” Tapes were made by tribe members and repeatedly broadcast over the area. Within five days, 2,400 Montagnards had come to the outpost for aid and protection. Soldiers found through testing that aerial loudspeakers were most effective at night, which also added a safety factor for the crews.¹⁹

Although the original CIA interest in North Vietnam was to gather intelligence and disrupt the government, by 1963 interest rose in using propaganda to incite resistance forces. However, this was a delicate matter due to the failure to support Hungarian resistance during the 1956 uprisings. Political limitations placed on the CIA meant they could never do more than agitate the people in the North.²⁰

Herbert Weisshart, a covert political action specialist, arrived in Saigon in March 1963 to organize a notional resistance movement for the CIA. Appealing to Vietnamese mythology, Weisshart created the *Secret Sword of the Patriots League* (SSPL). In the year 1428, this mythological sword had been delivered to the tale’s hero by a turtle swimming in a Hanoi lake. With it, the Vietnamese were able to defeat the invading Chinese. Weisshart hoped to create dissension between the Vietnamese and Chinese by utilizing this image. He recalled that “it would provide an ostensible sponsor for real teams on the ground and, if all went well, would provoke paranoia in the DRV hierarchy.” To support this plan Weisshart developed programs like Operation Loki.²¹

Under this program, North Vietnamese fisherman were kidnapped and brought to Cu Lao Cham, or Paradise Island, off Da Nang. They were indoctrinated at an SSPL resistance camp notionally located in North Vietnam. The men were held several days and then sent home with PSYOP-themed gift baskets. Some of the fisherman knew exactly where they were, having visited the island during the course of their lives. Reportedly, a number of fishermen sought to be

kidnapped to receive the medical treatment provided, and according to later SOG commander John K. Singlaub, a chance to gain “an average of over 20 pounds” during their ordeal. In light of this, it is unlikely the overt purpose for the camp succeeded. However, it may have provided other intangible benefits later in the war when the program was used to disseminate disinformation.²²

Throughout the summer of 1963, President Diem dealt with a growing Buddhist crisis. Diem’s refusal to allow Buddhist temples to fly flags during Buddha’s birthday celebrations in May 1963 began a wave of riots and self-immolations by monks. The international press seized on this turmoil to portray his government as illegitimate. Unwittingly, this supported a North Vietnamese propaganda effort. Subsequent North Vietnamese histories make clear the extent to which agents of the North organized and agitated within the Buddhist movement. Regardless, this had the desired effect and may have helped lead Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge to begin working with coup plotters immediately after his arrival in Vietnam that August.²³

Although it was not clear from press reports, the NLF insurgents were being overwhelmed during this period. The official PAVN history of the period states:

Just as the political struggle combined with armed struggle began to develop in late 1960 early 1961, the enemy launched a vicious counter attack. Using large numbers of troops, superior mobility and heavy fire power, the United States and its puppets constantly attacked our bases in the mountains, mounted sweeps and blockades of the contested areas, and seized and occupied portions of our liberated areas in the lowlands.²⁴

Prior to the November coup, the North admitted that the South had gained control over more than two-thirds of the rural population and established more than 3,500 strategic hamlets. They

further claimed that over 40,000 cadre and soldiers had entered the South by the end of 1963. Rather than the image of a homegrown insurgency, it is clear that the North was assuming control of the war because of the attrition of the Viet Cong force. According to the official history, “these troops represented 50 percent of the full-time armed forces in the South and 80 percent of the cadre and technical personnel assigned to the command and staff organization in South Vietnam in 1963.” Analysis of rice production during the period supports this loss of VC control.²⁵

The psychological effort began to take precedence in the covert program as the CIA slowly realized that the infiltration operations had been a failure. William Colby expressed his doubts about the entire agent operation and urged phasing it out. It was in the context of these CIA failures that pressure grew to transfer operations to the Pentagon. Military Assistance Command-Vietnam (MACV) staff expressed a willingness to phase in responsibility for the operations. However, they envisaged keeping CIA specialists in the new organization. This raised issues over expanding the program and maintaining the deniability the CIA wanted. This eventually led to MACV-Studies and Observations Group taking over the programs.²⁶

On 2 November 1963, President Diem was overthrown and later murdered. In combination with the assassination of President Kennedy later that month, South Vietnam had reached a critical juncture. Despite his shortcomings, Diem had made progress in unifying the nation and fighting an insurgency increasingly manned by Northerners. His death unleashed a period of instability at a vital moment that allowed the insurgency to grow to a structural threat to the nation.

In the immediate aftermath of the coup, Vietnamese PSYWAR units focused on explaining what had happened. The 23rd ARVN Division dropped 140,000 leaflets during the

first week of November 1963 in their area of operations. The principal message consisted of explaining the coup d'état and the new military government. As one MACV report described the process in Darlac Province, ten-man teams were attached to each district "to provide each...with a means to counter VC propaganda against the new government." Subsequent to the November 1963 coup, MACV reported a complete shift in the Vietnamese government desire to use PSYOP, stating that Diem had wanted absolute control over all aspects of psychological operations. However, rather than simply a budding acceptance of PSYOP, the new government leaders were increasingly dependent on the United States and so more compliant with their demands, regardless of the programs' appropriateness within Vietnamese culture.²⁷

An analysis of reports covering the five months between July and November 1963 paint a picture of the intense PSYOP activities being conducted towards the end of Diem's rule. Contrary to MACV claims, the program had been widely supported by Diem, but along lines he deemed to be culturally appropriate. The vast majority of nearly 2,500,000 leaflets dropped during this period were in support of the Chieu Hoi program. The same was true for the eighty-eight reported loudspeaker missions. An additional task was to encourage refugee movement. On the ground, PSYWAR teams showed films to thousands of villagers, tested novel equipment usages, such as the audio-visual Tri-Lambretta, and conducted face-to-face communication. The Vietnamese Information Service was functioning nationally, supported by USIA representatives. The American advisory effort was integrated into each of the ARVN PSYWAR battalions. However, with the death of Diem this structure was now leaderless.²⁸

Government instability as a result of the coup caused the PSYOP effort to lose focus. The high turnover in Vietnamese PSYWAR leadership exacerbated this. A last major factor was the new Johnson administration's own struggle to keep the situation under control while it sought a

way forward. The need for consistent messaging could not be met in such a situation. These factors dominated the PSYOP effort for most of 1964. Despite these issues, at the tactical level both ARVN PSYWAR and its U.S. advisors and support units continued to expand and test the limits of PSYOP capabilities in support of counterinsurgency operations.

While the PSYOP effort was developing to influence behavior, work was continuing on assessing enemy propaganda to help gauge the effectiveness of the program. One such analysis was conducted of enemy propaganda activities in Long An Province, near Saigon. It found that the Viet Cong propaganda teams typically consisted of four to five armed men who arrived in a hamlet between seven and nine in the evening. These were usually area natives. They stayed in the village until dawn conducting propaganda sessions, “which may either be the house-to-house type of contact or a group meeting and lecture involving all inhabitants.” Typically, they distributed handbills and leaflets urging villagers to stop support the South Vietnamese government and the strategic hamlet program using threats and persuasion. The Viet Cong also attempted to ‘jam’ loudspeaker broadcasts by requiring villagers to beat on pots and pans in order to make the broadcast unintelligible. Death threats were also made against villagers, but normally only performed when a specific psychological goal could be achieved. This cruelty often backfired and ran counter to the normal Maoist concept of building support among the rural population. The report noted, in one village people “were at one time sympathetic to the VC. But when one of the village representatives was murdered by the VC, the inhabitants reportedly turned against the VC.”²⁹

As part of the attempt to seize the initiative in direct communications, VIS teams operated in villages. They attempted to gain support from, and better understand the needs and desires of the villagers. Normally the VIS teams produced a report, along with the Vietnamese

representative of the USIS, to help illustrate what was happening in the rural areas. One such study concluded that only people in remote areas were influenced by Viet Cong propaganda. “On the contrary, the people living in the district, near the market always side with the Government. For example, in this Hamlet (Ky Chau) about 80 percent of the people follow the Government. While 80 percent of the people in 4 other hamlets (in the Viet Cong controlled area) is [sic] ‘influenced’ by the Viet-Cong and follows them.” To the extent this is accurate, it indicates the primacy of security.³⁰

For the fifth time in six months, ARVN PSYWAR commanders changed in May 1964. MACV reported that the “continuous personnel changes in this key assignment seriously handicaps PSYOPS.” However, on the tactical level many improvements continued to be made. That same month, the ARVN 1st PSYWAR Battalion deployed its Cultural/Drama team outside of Saigon for the first time. These teams provided entertainment such as music and plays, while supporting MEDCAPS or other PSYOP and civic action operations. Various corps began to experiment with a weapons turn-in program with positive results. Initiated by U.S. Special Forces, the program quickly spread and leaflets were designed to support it. Additionally, despite an overall decrease in Chieu Hoi ralliers since the 1963 coup, military intelligence reported gaining “valuable information from ralliers such as unit designations, locations of arms caches, and indications of Viet Cong intentions.”³¹

That same month, as the government of Vietnam began to consider forming a Political Warfare (POLWAR) structure, the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces Chief of the Psychological Warfare Division headed a group to Taiwan to study the Nationalist Chinese POLWAR system. This differed from a PSYOP structure in that it included operations that could be termed morale and welfare, designed to maintain public and military support for the

government. Without their support, or at least acquiescence, winning the war would be difficult. Just as important was denying that support to the NLF. The POLWAR system was designed to coordinate these tasks.

On the anniversary of the signing of the Geneva Accords in July 1964, South Vietnamese PSYWAR units began efforts to publicize a *National Day of Shame*, “to promote loyalty to the government and militancy in the fight against the Viet Cong.” On the ground, teams continued expanded face-to-face interactions to spread the news of the Chieu Hoi program. In the III Corps Tactical Zone, aerial loudspeaker missions flew over Binh Thuan Province to advise farmers that the South Vietnamese government was destroying crops grown for the Viet Cong. This program was meant to deprive the enemy of food, but also to diminish support for them among the populace. The NLF had promised to protect farmers who grew food for them. Showing their inability to provide security was designed to convince farmers that it was “futile to stay in the Viet Cong controlled areas” and thus deprive the insurgents of support in rural regions. In another program, PSYWAR units across the country exploited the Viet Cong massacre of forty Regional Force family members in Dinh Tuong province under the theme of a *National Day of Mourning*. Regional Forces were South Vietnamese local militia units. The incident occurred after a vicious battle with a battalion-sized Viet Cong element in Cai Be district on 20 July. This program highlighted the attempt to use Viet Cong atrocities against them.³²

Regardless of the advances, it was difficult to conduct long-term PSYWAR planning with the revolving door leadership. This turmoil was exacerbated by continued instability at the national level in September with an attempted coup against General Nguyen Khanh, leader of the Military Revolutionary Council that ruled the nation. Post-coup unrest led to public sector strikes and eventually he threatened to crush the labor protests. Except for routine activities, most

PSYWAR/Civic Action units suspended operations during the chaos. MACV reported, “the prevailing attitude of Vietnamese PSYWAR personnel was to wait and see what happens to the government.” Once again, the inability to maintain consistent messaging undercut psychological operations. Later, the Military Revolutionary Council used these units to publicize their proclamations.³³

Among the lessons learned by that point was the need for effective PSYOP coordination. To achieve this, Combined PSYWAR/Civic Action Operations Centers were established in each Corps Tactical Zone. This organization brought together U.S. Operations Mission, Vietnamese Information Service, Civil Affairs teams, PSYWAR teams and sector S-5s and their advisors to coordinate activities and aid in planning. Eventually, this program was extended to division and sector level. Significantly, the South Vietnamese government did not allow creation of a combined PSYOP structure at the national level. This hampered coordination as the war progressed; however, at least at the lower levels a connection was developed. These centers generated PSYOP plans and coordinated military and civilian PSYWAR activities.³⁴

By 1965, the U.S. was poised to conduct the most intense PSYOP campaign of its history. Ultimately, it fielded a PSYOP Group, supported a widespread South Vietnamese information program, and battled an extensive North Vietnamese program. As an example of how to provide assistance to a host nation fighting a counterinsurgency, the period 1960 to 1965 in Vietnam offers many useful lessons. It is also an object lesson in the limitations of that relationship.

The innovative use of aerial loudspeakers is one positive example. These were used to assist stranded refugees, assist in humanitarian actions, encourage surrender, spread national-level messages, and harass the enemy. Printed matter was ubiquitous. Millions of leaflets,

magazines, posters, and other products were disseminated. Most important, however, was the development of the Vietnamese psychological operations capability. Training was widespread, from short classes for Montagnard tribesmen to months-long training for RVNAF officers at schools in the United States. It included development of the all-important face-to-face component, denying the Viet Cong a monopoly in this task. The American advisory system conducted surveys and propaganda analysis, placed advisors at all levels, and established printing plants. The U.S. also worked in conjunction with the Vietnamese to expand media facilities. A system of centralized messaging control and corps-level PSYOP coordination centers was established.

Very few in the American military had conducted these operations and none on this scale. As a consequence, innovation ruled. The military advisory effort, while imperfect, had the benefit of depth. Advisors worked at all levels, assessing operations, developing innovative uses for PSYOP, and providing critical support to the South Vietnamese forces. However, unless this soldier was extremely adept at understanding other cultures, all actions and decisions by the counterpart could be viewed, subconsciously, through a prism of American culture. This may have led to a perception by some Americans that the ARVN was reluctant to use PSYOP, because it did not accept specific advice. In such a situation, advice on specific actions is less important than advice on general principals of psychological operations.³⁵

One other lesson is clear, the difficulty of conducting covert psychological operations. Even as agent operations continued in the North, the inherent flaw of running these missions in a sealed nation meant that most teams were unsuccessful. It is likely that most of the captured teams informed the North Vietnamese of at least the outlines of the SSPL program, thereby

demolishing the credibility of the fictional movement. Other covert actions later in the war were successful, in implementing covert PSYOP is intrinsic difficult.

Despite American displeasure with Diem, he was able to hold the country together in a way his immediate successors were not. This control allowed the pacification campaign to move forward, however haltingly, and allowed the persuasive effect of PSYOP to transform words into actions. Looking at the trend of Chieu Hoi ralliers during the period is instructive to understanding the effect of the coup. Between Tet 1963 and the end of the year, roughly 11,200 people took advantage of the program. In contrast, during the entire year 1964, less than half that number rallied. Despite tremendous success in building South Vietnamese psychological operations capability, it could not overcome the inherent instability of the nation after November 1963. Without the coup, it is questionable whether the situation would have degraded so quickly. Contrary to standard image, VIS and PSYWAR units were operating well in an extensive number of areas during this period. They may not have been perfect, but their intimate knowledge of the language and culture compensated for these lapses to an extent.³⁶

Given that the structure was in place, how does one measure its effectiveness? This question plagued the American experience throughout the war. The advisory system was ultimately less important than the quality of South Vietnamese leadership. This had been improving prior to the coup, but subsequently collapsed. American soldiers' limited knowledge of counterinsurgency techniques and Vietnamese culture often led to a reliance on bad metrics. For PSYOP it was even more difficult to gauge success. Residents frequently fear both sides in a counterinsurgency and will say whatever they think will cause them the least problems. However, one can look at indirect indicators such as villagers' behavior and enemy reactions to the messaging over time to make an estimate. By this measure, the attempts to 'jam'

loudspeakers by banging pots indicate a fear the villagers would hear and believe the messages. Internal Viet Cong documents also display an appreciation of the effectiveness of the Chieu Hoi program. The large number of desertions and resulting intelligence gathered, followed by a sudden drop, show a clear dividing line at the coup in 1963. Psychological dominance is ephemeral. People will shift allegiances not based on words, but on deeds. Words alone will not overcome failure to provide security or to show the enemy inability to do the same. PSYOP is not a substitute for effective strategy and operations.³⁷

With these caveats, the psychological operations program was large and functioning when the decisive changes were made to the American level of involvement in 1965. But this was against the backdrop of a clearly losing war. President Lyndon B. Johnson's decision to Americanize the war meant an exponential growth in psychological operations as well. This eventually led that small team from the 246th PSYOP Company to collaborate with AVRN PSYWAR elements in the dusty farming village of Chanh Luu and ultimately to the most intensive use of psychological operations in American, and possibly world, history.

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