

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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South Vietnam:
A Competition of Self-fulfilling Prophecies

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Dear Mr. Nolte,

Late in March this year three U.S. AID officials from Saigon visited Kuala Lumpur to attempt to discover how Malaya had achieved such remarkable success in its rural development program. Last week I visited Saigon to see what had been done to transplant the Malayan success to the bitterly embattled land of South Vietnam. Having spent only a day in Saigon, I am reluctant to write about impressions formed so hastily. It is quite possible that my impressions are totally wrong. However, what I saw in Saigon made the urge to write irrepressible; so write I must.

The Saigon AID officials were properly impressed with what they saw in Kuala Lumpur. They found appealing Malaya's success both in creating a program with a good deal of popular political appeal, and in tightening control over a new and indigenous bureaucracy. The first could be useful in gaining the support of the Vietnamese peasantry, and the second could remove the cause of many past frustrations with reform programs. The AID men returned to Saigon confident that they could achieve at least some of the same type of success there. Their enthusiasm was infectious, as it would naturally be in a situation where operational personnel generally experience only despair, and they managed to gain widespread acceptance for a new program of rural development. In addition, they gained the attention of some of the exiles (forced and voluntary) who had returned to Saigon with new hope and vigor after the downfall of the Diem regime. Probably the most important of these exiles is a westernized Vietnamese named Oanh, who is Vice Premier for Economic and Financial Affairs (known to the Americans as Jack Owen).

While the three Americans were generating enthusiasm for the Malayan¹-type assault, Oanh requested an appraisal of the plan from his assistant, Pho Ba Quan, a dynamic and intelligent 23 year-old returned "golden man" who would be equally at home in Paris or New York, or in his present setting in a busy high-ceilinged office in the massive grey-stone building of the national bank. This request produced a happy coincidence that pushed the program forward and ensured its complete acceptance. Two weeks earlier Oanh had given Quan the task of creating a new coordinating agency that could speed up government activity in stimulating economic development in the rural areas. Having struggled alone with this crucial and intractable problem for some time, Quan was able to see immediately the value of the Malayan pattern of organization. He wrote an enthusiastic appraisal for Oanh and soon after met with the Americans to work out the details of the new program.

On the American side the planning of details has been assigned to

Earl Kulp, one of the three original visitors to Kuala Lumpur. Kulp is working out the details of organization, reporting and control, while Quan is engineering the (largely informal) cooperation of crucial Vietnamese officers. The Quan-Kulp team offers considerable hope, for it combines technical competence and a sensitivity to the informal power structure with a great deal of sheer personal energy, one of the most important prerequisites for success in inaugurating a new program.

Oanh brings the backing of the government's center of financial power. The crucial support of the military has been obtained through agreement in principle and through cooptation. General Kao, the Deputy Premier, and General Kim, Secretary General of the powerful Pacification Committee have both agreed to the new program. General Kim's assistant, Colonel Lak, who heads the Permanent Bureau of the Pacification Committee, has been made official head of the New Rural Life Program and also serves on the Quan-Kulp creation, the Rural Economic Planning Commission. The Commission draws in heads of technical departments in Saigon and will provide the organizational structure for coordinating activities of all departments. Thus a structure has been created that provides both formal and informal support from a large number of crucial power centers in the government.

To launch the new program, 50 young graduating second lieutenants will be assigned to the Commission. They will be under the formal control of Colonel Lak, but will be attached as adjutants to the colonels now serving as governors in the provinces. Using Kulp's standardized reporting forms, the adjutants will gather information on all aspects of government activity in the rural areas. They will report directly to the provincial governors, and in turn to the Permanent Bureau of the Pacification Committee and to the Rural Economic Planning Commission. This will provide both provincial and central executives with the information necessary to move the machinery of government more rapidly for the benefit of the rural people.

Here is a new program designed to prosecute the war on the social and economic front as well as on the military front. Will it work? And more important, will it make any difference whether it works or not?

The obstacles facing the new program are legion, and many of them are sufficient alone to cast serious doubt on the chances of success. At the lower levels, one does not know how effective the new provincial adjutants will be. Quan recognizes that their morale and commitment will be crucial factors. He knows that these young men have been drafted. They are not serving voluntarily and would most certainly prefer to stay at home if they had any choice. However, they are all intelligent and well-trained, and it might be possible to gain their whole-hearted support.

More in question is the morale and support of existing government officers at the lower levels: the agricultural and health officers and the engineers, who will provide the technical competence the new program will need. Many of these officers are convinced or afraid that the present government will not last. They are naturally reluctant to show enthusiasm for the new program for fear of signing their own future death warrants. The long war and vacillation at the top have produced a large corps of fence-sitters. Gaining the support of these officers will require more than a

new set of formal reporting procedures. Success will depend at least partly on the strength of the top leadership.

Although important elements of the military and civilian leadership now appear committed to the new program, their continued support is by no means assured. The program will increase both the financial power and the popular political power of Oanh; and the more successful it is, the more his power will be increased. This may prove too much of a threat to both military leaders and the more politically-minded civilian leaders (such as Dr. Hoan, the Dai Viet leader who was allegedly to have taken over after Khanh overthrew the overthrowers of Diem, and now languishes in a high position deprived of power by the dominance of the military) and they may attempt to destroy the new development program to keep Oanh from acquiring too much power.

Even if the development program does not bring a move against Oanh, thus producing its own failure, the ability of the central government to follow through and make the program effective is not assured. The most common criticism of the Khanh government I heard in Saigon was that Khanh holds the power of obstruction, but not the power of initiative. He can say "no" to a program, but he does not have the power to propose an effective alternative, nor even to ensure that an agreed upon program is carried through. Political power at the top appears to be sufficiently fragmented to deprive the government of the real ability to act, especially in the face of resistance or only half-hearted support throughout the bureaucracy.

There is also the danger from the armed enemy. If the new program appears to be succeeding, the new adjutants, and anyone else identified with it, will certainly become special targets of the Viet Cong. While this is not a danger to be minimized, it does seem pale in comparison with the dangers the program faces within the Government of Vietnam itself.

The situation is not without hope, but the hope lies precariously in the competition of two self-fulfilling prophecies. Oanh and Quan might be able to maintain sufficient power and commitment at the top to make at least the first stage of the program work. If they can do this, they will reenforce the power of the central government, which will in turn gain increased support from the lower level bureaucrats now sitting on the fence. The more the program succeeds, the more it is likely to succeed. The more people think it will succeed, the more they will act in such a way as to ensure its success. But a reverse self-supporting circle is also possible. If people think the program will not succeed, they will act in such a way as to ensure its failure. Right now one cannot be sure which self-supporting circle will be set in motion. However, Oanh and Quan seem to be moving with considerable skill, especially in the area of gaining support at the center. My inclination, perhaps only an indication of uncritical optimism, is to bet on Oanh and Quan.

There remains another and more serious question. Will it make any difference whether the new program fails or succeeds? There seem to be two opposing answers to this question; I find myself in disagreement with both. On the one hand is the narrow military approach arguing that this is a war and in a war you must destroy the enemy. I think this narrow approach has already been sufficiently weakened by the defeat of the French in the North

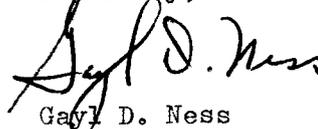
and by the current inability of over 200,000 Vietnamese regulars to make any headway, or even to hold their own, against far lesser numbers.

The other argument, which appears to be gaining official acceptance, is that this is really a struggle for the minds of men, and above all the peasantry must be won over. Without subscribing to the narrow military approach, I have grave doubts about how important the peasantry is in this struggle. At this point the war seems to be a sheer power struggle between opposing groups. Neither has more or less "democratic" legitimacy than the other. Neither has - or will - come to power on the basis of popular support. And both sides use the most brutal methods (wittingly and unwittingly, but the results are just as deadly) to coerce the peasantry into supporting them and opposing the other. Regardless of how good is the government's "image" in the rural areas, peasants will be quite naturally reluctant to show their support during the day if it might cost them their lives during the night.

There is a lesson to be learned from the defeat of Communist insurgencies in both Malaya and the Philippines. I would argue that both movements were defeated primarily by military action without any real reform in the lives of the peasants. There were promises and symbols to be sure: the promise of independence in Malaya and of Magsaysay's reforms in the Philippines. However, these symbols and promises did not make any real appreciable difference in the daily lives of the peasants. They did make a difference at the top, however, where they signalled mobilization and dedication in the leadership.

Thus I would argue that whether or not this new Vietnamese development program works will not, in itself, make much difference in the outcome of the war. If it succeeds it will not make the peasants rise up against the Viet Cong; if it fails it will not drive the peasants into the arms of the Viet Cong. The success or failure of the new program will, however, be a sensitive indicator of a far more important variable: the resolve and the ability of the government to assume initiative and to provide effective leadership. If the central government proves incapable of mobilizing at the top and of controlling its lower administrative ranks even for this rather limited program, it is unlikely that it will ever be capable of mobilizing sufficiently to defeat a foe of the calibre of the Viet Cong.

Sincerely,



Gayl D. Ness

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1. I still feel inclined to call this a Malayan rather than a Malaysian program, despite the emergence of the greater federation last year. The development program was put together within the unique balance of forces in Malaya, not Malaysia. There is now an attempt to extend the development program to the new states in Malaysia, but we have yet to see whether this will be successful or not.