MEMORANDUM
RM-5788-ISA/ARPA
JANUARY 1969

PACIFICATION AND THE VIET CONG SYSTEM IN DINH TUONG:
1966-1967

David W. P. Elliott and W. A. Stewart

This research is supported by the Department of Defense under Contracts DAHC15 67 C 0142 and DAHC15 67 C 0143, monitored by the Assistant Secretary of Defense (International Security Affairs) and by the Advanced Research Projects Agency. Views or conclusions contained in this study should not be interpreted as representing the official opinion or policy of ISA or ARPA.

PREPARED FOR:
THE OFFICE OF THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY
OF DEFENSE/INTERNATIONAL SECURITY AFFAIRS
AND THE
ADVANCED RESEARCH PROJECTS AGENCY

Rand
SANTA MONICA, CA 90406

APPROVED FOR PUBLIC RELEASE; DISTRIBUTION UNLIMITED
FOREWORD

This report is one of a series of Rand studies that examine the organization, operations, motivation, and morale of the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese forces that fought in South Vietnam.

Between August 1964 and December 1968 The Rand Corporation conducted approximately 2400 interviews with Vietnamese who were familiar with the activities of the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese army. Reports of those interviews, totaling some 62,000 pages, were reviewed and released to the public in June 1972. They can be obtained from the National Technical Information Service of the Department of Commerce.

The release of the interviews has made possible the declassification and release of some of the classified Rand reports derived from them. To remain consistent with the policy followed in reviewing the interviews, information that could lead to the identification of individual interviewees was deleted, along with a few specific references to sources that remain classified. In most cases, it was necessary to drop or to change only a word or two, and in some cases, a footnote. The meaning of a sentence or the intent of the author was not altered.

The reports contain information and interpretations relating to issues that are still being debated. It should be pointed out that there was substantive disagreement among the Rand researchers involved in Vietnam research at the time, and contrary points of view with totally different implications for U.S. operations can be found in the reports. This internal debate mirrored the debate that was then current throughout the nation.

A complete list of the Rand reports that have been released to the public is contained in the bibliography that follows.

(CRC, BJ: May 1975)
Bibliography of Related Rand Reports


These reports can be obtained from The Rand Corporation.


RM-5013-1 A Profile of the PAVN Soldier in South Vietnam, K. Kellen, June 1966.


RM-5338 Two Analytical Aids for Use with the Rand Interviews, F. Denton, May 1967.


RM-5487-1 The Viet Cong Style of Politics, N. Leites, May 1969.

RM-5522-1 Inducements and Deterrents to Defection: An Analysis of the Motives of 125 Defectors, L. Goure, August 1968.

RM-5533-1 The Insurgent Environment, R. M. Pearce, May 1969.

RM-5647 Volunteers for the Viet Cong, F. Denton, September 1968.


Rallying Potential Among the North Vietnamese Armed Forces, A Sweetland, December 1970.
PREFACE

This Memorandum is one of a series of studies undertaken by The RAND Corporation for the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense (International Security Affairs) and for the Advanced Research Projects Agency of the Department of Defense. It is intended as a contribution to the better understanding of the complex problem of pacification under conditions of conflict in the underdeveloped countries of the world.

The study derives from over 250 interviews conducted in the field by one of the authors and from his considerable experience working and living with the Vietnamese people in Dinh Tuong province. Field research was concluded by David W. P. Elliott prior to leaving Vietnam in 1967. The basic work was essentially completed before the end of that year and before the occurrence of the Tet offensive of 30 January 1968. In addition, it should be noted that the study is narrowly focused on Dinh Tuong province, which has certain unique geographical and population features that may make some of the findings of the study only marginally applicable outside of Dinh Tuong, or even within the Mekong River Delta itself.
SUMMARY

The present study undertakes to describe the essential reactions of the Viet Cong system in a single province in the Mekong River Delta to the pacification program undertaken by the Government of Vietnam (GVN) in 1966, which was bolstered by the arrival of U.S. forces in Dinh Tuong province in 1967. An understanding of how this system is organized, how it functions, what strategy and tactics it pursues, and how it reacts to perturbation is essential background for the planning of pacification operations.

Central to the study is the treatment of the Viet Cong movement as a "system," which implies regularly interacting or interdependent elements forming a unified whole. The term is used also to underline the importance of dealing with the Viet Cong as a complex of organization and personnel, operating within a clearly defined geographical environment, together with the strategy and tactics of their deployment within that territory.

A view of the geography of Dinh Tuong province suggests that local conditions are less favorable to the Viet Cong than in much of the rest of Vietnam. Open terrain in parts of the province and natural boundaries, the Plain of Reeds to the north and the Mekong River to the south, constrain the Viet Cong to identifiable areas of operation. Government control of these areas of the province could have spillover effects into other areas and other provinces, since important regional lines of Viet Cong communications pass through Dinh Tuong and the province itself plays an important role in the insurgency strategy for the Delta.
The objective of the Viet Cong system in Dinh Tuong province, at least to the time when active field research on this study ended in November 1967, was to establish control over both territory and people. A brief review of the political structure of the Viet Cong movement in the province suggests that those cadres who served as links between district and village organizations, who directed, monitored, and in recent periods made operational decisions, were "critical" to the effective operation of the system. These persons were heavily involved in face-to-face communications, required some freedom of movement to accomplish their tasks, and were people in whom the Viet Cong system had a heavy investment in training and experience. In contrast, minor participants in the system, who performed functions requiring little training, were both readily replaceable and were only marginally committed to the movement.

Viet Cong doctrine seems dedicated to maintaining a state of balance among their military forces, at least as among Guerrilla forces, province Local Force, and region Main Force. The developmental sequence begins with the appearance of Guerrilla units in an armed propaganda role, followed by the emergence of Local Force units that build over time to battalion strength, culminating in the introduction of Main Force units from outside the province to conduct major operations. These units interact to support, shield, and screen each other, and interact also with the political arm of the system, which provides logistical support and manpower and receives protection in return. Explicit in Viet Cong directives and in the statements of former VC is the view that extension of the system into new areas is contingent upon a balanced interrelationship among military forces and upon a dual use of political and military methods.
The analysis suggests that Viet Cong military activity sets up a "threshold of force," mythical or real, that tends to inhibit GVN military units from operating in less than battalion size where Viet Cong units are presumed to be present. This affords "critical" cadres the sense of security they need to move about and be "effective" in their work. The 1966-1967 history of pacification operations in Dinh Tuong prior to the Tet offensive suggests that if Local Force battalions and companies can be kept out of an area, the entry of heavy Main Force battalions becomes more risky for the Viet Cong, and small unit pacification operations can be conducted with greater freedom, which can curtail the movement of critical cadres.

Viet Cong strategic and tactical reactions to the pacification programs of 1966-1967 are analyzed. In brief, the Viet Cong strategic view of U.S. intentions was that the United States intended to drive them from the heavily populated and VC-controlled center of the province. Tactically, despite preparations that included a return to the "combat village" technique used in dealing with the GVN pacification of 1962-1963, VC military units were adversely affected by U.S. mobility and firepower. "American-annihilation perimeters," concentric rings of VC-fortified villages, and other tactics were only marginally effective in inhibiting U.S./GVN operations.

As the Viet Cong military were pressed out of the eastern portion of the province, their control of territory and population began to slip. A significant VC reaction to this trend involved a considerable decentralization of authority to newly created inter-village organizations, inter-village sectors and inter-village clusters, which
intervened between district and village structures. In addition, cadres who had been advanced to higher levels of organization, province and region, were brought back down to take over district operations. Cadres who had performed well at district level were posted down to inter-village sectors and inter-village clusters, and at the same time doubled as leaders of individual villages. Thus, the erosion of VC communications as a result of pacification in 1967 was beginning to impose heavy demands on talented and experienced cadres, who were in short supply.

The view of the Viet Cong in Dinh Tuong province as a system implies a need to deal with it systematically. It is useful, of course, to apply pressure at particular points of the system. Given the ability of the Viet Cong structure to adapt, however, simultaneous pressure on the system at a number of points may be required. This should include explicit recognition of the need to take the local requirements and operations of the Viet Cong system into consideration when planning countermeasures. Government and Viet Cong communications lines are not always coterminous, and government and Viet Cong views of what is strategically important may coincide only by accident. An area, which on other grounds might have relatively low priority to the government, might be of great import because of its utility to the Viet Cong. Pacification priorities and approaches should be determined not only on the basis of what makes sense from the government's viewpoint (e.g. they want to open roads X and Y, or collect taxes in village Z) but also in terms of what the Viet Cong is trying to do or is doing in a given area.
CONTENTS

FOREWORD................................................................. iii
PREFACE................................................................. vii
SUMMARY............................................................... ix

Section
I. INTRODUCTION.................................................... 1
II. THE GEOGRAPHIC IMPORTANCE OF DINH TUONG............. 7
III. THE POLITICAL ARM................................................ 12
    Selection and Training of Cadres............................ 13
    Cadre Activities................................................ 15
    Basic Organization Structure................................. 17
    Alternate Levels: Directing, Monitoring,
    Executing.................................................................... 21
    Territorial Unity of Command................................... 23
    The Security Channel.............................................. 25
    The Viet Cong Military Umbrella............................... 28

IV. MILITARY BALANCE, TERRITORIAL CONTROL, AND STRATEGY... 31
V. REACTIONS TO PACIFICATION...................................... 50
    Reactions to GVN Pacification................................ 51
    VC Strategic View of the U.S. Role............................ 57
    The "American-Aannihilation Perimeter" Response......... 61
    VC Problems in Facing U.S. Forces......................... 63
    Reaction Tactics and Terminology......................... 67
    Maintaining Control in "Liberated Areas".................. 70
    Cross-Pressures on Villagers.................................. 76
    Decentralization of Organization............................ 80
    Pacification Constraints on Local Force Activities..... 96

VI. THE VIET CONG AS A BALANCED SYSTEM: SOME OBSERVATIONS.. 100
The intent of this study is to describe the Viet Cong system as it operated in a single province in the Mekong River Delta prior to November of 1967. A particular effort has also been made to outline the essential reactions of the Viet Cong system to the pacification program undertaken in 1966 by the Government of Viet Nam (GVN), which was bolstered by the stationing of a brigade of U.S. infantry in the province at the beginning of 1967. An understanding of how this system is organized, how it functioned, what strategy and tactics it followed, and how it reacted to perturbation in 1967 is still essential for the planning of pacification operations today.

An essential starting point of the study is the view of the Viet Cong movement in Dinh Tuong province as a "system." The term is used to underline the importance of dealing with the Viet Cong as a complex of organization and personnel, operating within a clearly defined geographical environment, together with the strategy and tactics of their deployment within that territory. "System" implies regularly interacting or interdependent elements forming a unified whole. Thus, the Viet Cong in Dinh Tuong is viewed as a balanced, well-coordinated, closely interrelated, political-military organization in which each element supports every other element and multiplies its effectiveness.

This Memorandum begins with a short survey of the strategic and geographic importance of the province to the Viet Cong. The view is taken that the province is a strategic crossroads for Viet Cong lines of communication and logistics, that the geography and terrain of the province
offer opportunities for interdiction of these lines of communication, and that GVN assertion of control over areas which the Viet Cong regard as strategically important could have spillover effects in adjacent areas of Viet Cong control.

To provide background for subsequent discussion of organizational changes in the face of GVN pacification and to suggest critical junctures in the political structure of the Viet Cong system, a short chapter treats organizations at the district and village level. The political arm is viewed as giving direction and form to the movement and as mobilizing an essentially neutral, or at least war-weary, local population for the support of combined political-military operations against the government. The goal of the system is seen as control over both people and territory.

Critical to the functioning and extension of this control system are the cadres who make the operative decisions, pass on directives from higher echelons, maintain communications, and activate and coordinate the local structure. Of particular interest, although detailed discussion of their role is reserved for the chapter on reactions to pacification, are those cadres who provide the links between district and village level organizations. Implicit in the analysis is the hypothesis that cadres in general, and particularly those who link district and village, must be heavily involved in face-to-face communications if the system is to remain effective and maintain its cohesiveness. Critical cadres are the product of considerable training and experience: erosion of their ranks poses serious replacement problems for the Viet Cong system. The minor participants in Viet Cong activities, on the
other hand, including low level cadres who perform functions requiring little training, are both readily replaceable and only marginally committed to the movement. Only when large numbers of these lesser participants defect, surrender, or are captured is the performance of the system materially affected.

An understanding of Viet Cong perceptions of the need for maintaining balance among their three types of military force -- Main Force, Local Force, and Guerrillas -- and their views on the importance of territorial control for strategic purposes may be significant for the design of pacification programs in Dinh Tuong province. Explicit in Viet Cong directives and in the statements of former VC is the view that extension of the system into new areas is contingent upon a balanced interrelationship among military forces and upon a dual use of political and military methods. In the present analysis, particular attention is directed to the role of Local Force units, which appear to support and protect Guerrilla forces as well as to screen and establish a basing system for the deployment of Main Force units.

The sequence appears to begin with the emergence of Guerrillas in an armed propaganda role or in protection of propaganda cadres, followed by the emergence of Local Force (provincial) units that increase in size over time to battalion strength, culminating in the introduction of Main Force (regional) battalions from outside the province to conduct major operations. The analysis suggests that Local Force activity creates a psychological umbrella, a "threshold of force," that tends to inhibit Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) units of less than battalion
size from entering an area where Viet Cong forces are presumed to be active. The "presence" of Local Force, Main Force, or both could prove an operative myth. To the extent that it is treated as a real threat by ARVN commanders, however, it inhibits their entry into threatened areas in small unit operations against the structure of critical cadres. Experience in Dinh Tuong suggests that if Local Force can be kept out of an area, the entry of Main Force becomes much less likely (or at least Main Force units must take greater risks to enter the area), small unit pacification operations can be conducted, and freedom of movement of critical cadres is curtailed.

The final portion of the study is addressed to Viet Cong reactions to pacification in 1966 and 1967. The areas selected for pacification by the GVN were viewed by the Viet Cong as strategically important and essential to hold, but, in the event, their power to resist was limited. The Viet Cong feared not only that their lines of communication would be threatened but also that the government would press for the pacification of the "heartland area" in the center of the province where the Viet Cong system had long exerted control. In tactics, the Viet Cong returned to earlier concepts of resistance by villagers. In local strategy, the Viet Cong undertook harassments of major towns to force pacification forces back into a city-defending posture. In political organization, a decentralization of decision-making from district to intervillage levels occurred that may have weakened coordination within the district but enhanced the independent role of leaders of intervillage organizations. Whether or not critical cadres can be induced to defect or to surrender, or can be
captured, lies outside the framework of the present analysis.

As to data, the main source of information is approximately 250 interviews that have been conducted since 1965 with former members of the Viet Cong movement in Dinh Tuong Province. Whether ralliers or prisoners of war, those who were interviewed proved talkative; the average interview, translated into English, runs approximately 28 single-spaced pages. In many cases, subjects only came to be interviewed after extended periods in the hands of Vietnamese Government forces, which must be assumed to have sharply intensified their desire to offer unfavorable opinions and accounts of life in the Viet Cong movement. Not surprisingly, interviewees sought to present themselves and their past actions in a favorable light.

It is noteworthy that there are substantial reasons for confidence in the general reliability of information received, particularly where interviewees were talking about problems encountered by others, and more particularly about the experiences of persons outside their own family or kinship circle. If a number of subjects consistently reported that the Viet Cong face certain problems, it generally turned out to be true. Interview reporting was often validated by information received more directly from the Viet Cong, notably captured documents. Organizational structure, strategy, tactics, methods of dealing with villager reluctance to cooperate with the Viet Cong are revealed in these documents, which thus tend indirectly to corroborate findings derived from interviews.
In the recent history of the province, the Viet Cong movement has had its ebbs and flows. An examination of these successes and failures, as seen through the eyes of former participants in the enemy movement, may suggest lessons to be drawn for future U.S./GVN operations. Study of the organizational processes, the close attention to maintenance of balance between military and civilian operations and to maintaining proper balance among three types of Viet Cong military force, Main Force, Local Force, and Guerrillas, may suggest ways of disturbing this balance or disrupting the careful process of coordination that characterizes the movement's advance. Given the body of research that already exists on the details of Viet Cong organizational structure, recruiting procedures, military operations, coercive techniques, and political-historical origins, however, this study will only touch upon such matters to illustrate specific ways in which the Viet Cong system maintains balance among its component elements and strategies, and how it adapts to perturbation, notably the perturbation introduced by GVN/U.S. operations in Dinh Tuong during 1965-1967.
II. THE GEOGRAPHIC IMPORTANCE OF DINH TUONG

They, the Americans, have to do this, pacify Dinh Tuong since My Tho* is the carrying pole that links Western Nam Bo** with Saigon and also the gateway to Western Nam Bo for Saigon, because of the strategic highway going through the province and also because the province occupies an important position in the Mekong Delta. If they lose My Tho, they will lose Western Nam Bo.

The above excerpt from a notebook maintained by a Viet Cong local force military cadre during his attendance at a Party indoctrination session in 1966 suggests the strategic importance of Dinh Tuong Province in the eyes of the Viet Cong. Not only is much of the province rich and productive but it is also so situated that most of the Viet Cong traffic between areas of military operations north and west of Saigon and the rice surplus lower Delta area must pass through Dinh Tuong. Terrain and lack of tree cover in the northeastern portion of the province constrain the Viet Cong to lines of communication that parallel the government's main highway, National 4, as it

---

*The Viet Cong's "My Tho Province" includes both Dinh Tuong and Go Cong. My Tho was one of the 22 to 25 provinces into which the French divided what is now South Vietnam. After independence, President Diem redivided Viet Nam into 38 provinces and in many cases gave them more traditional Vietnamese names. Further divisions occurred for military and administrative reasons and the present number is 44. 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."

**Nam Bo comprises the area formerly known as Cochin-China, the farthest south of the three territorial divisions under French colonial rule.
runs southwest from Saigon through Long An Province to My Tho, the provincial capital of Dinh Tuong. Lack of cover for large troop movements also limits the route of Viet Cong egress from and return to their safehaven in the Plain of Reeds.

Putting a different geographic perspective on the province, the southern border of Dinh Tuong stretches approximately 45 miles along the northernmost branch of the Mekong River as it breaks down in the Delta. Taking up sizable portions of Dinh Tuong and including more than thirty miles of its northern border lies the Plain of Reeds, the inhospitable swampland safehaven of the Viet Cong. Three times as long as it is wide and running roughly east and west along the north bank of the Mekong River, the province occupies strategically important ground between the rice-rich, so-called "lower provinces" of the Delta and the main areas of Viet Cong operations and safehavens, the Iron Triangle northwest of Saigon and the Plain of Reeds almost due west of the capitol city.

Two main routes of Viet Cong communications pass near the geographical center of Dinh Tuong, the route crossing between the Plain of Reeds and the lower provinces of the delta and the route paralleling National Highway 4 toward the North. It would seem that were the government able to deny effective access to this province to the Viet Cong, their ability to operate in the lower provinces of the delta would be seriously curtailed.

Yet another geographical factor needs to be considered in accounting for the importance of Dinh Tuong. Being less heavily forested than is the norm in many parts of Vietnam, some portions of the province that border on the Plain of
Reeds provide poor cover for large scale Viet Cong operations. For example, the Viet Cong took much time and went to great effort to establish their control network and line of communications support structure in the "Tan Family" area lying between the Plain of Reeds and National Highway 4 and paralleling the highway between My Tho and Long An.

Egress from the Plain of Reeds was a continuing problem for the Viet Cong and they invested important efforts during the early period of their assertion of territorial control at two points: The Hau My-Hoi Cu egress in the northwest of the province -- 15 miles north of Cai Be on the Mekong River, and the Stone Pagoda egress in north central Dinh Tuong where the Commercial Canal from the Mekong enters the Plain of Reeds and intersects another canal that runs east-west through the Plain of Reeds. In both these areas strong Viet Cong control and defensive fortifications have been built up over time. Just south of the Stone Pagoda egress is the site of the important Viet Cong camp at Ap Bac hamlet in Nhi Binh village, where the Viet Cong 514th Local Force Battalion won the 3 January 1963 defensive victory reported by David Halberstam in The Making of a Quagmire. Other defensive-offensive successes were scored by the 514th in this general area during 1963. On 26 January 1965, however, the 514th was hit hard at their Ap Bac/Nhi Binh fortified campsite by another Vietnamese Army (ARVN) unit, with the 514th suffering 31 killed, 54 wounded, and many desertions.* Again, in mid-May of 1967,

*From captured, untitled, handwritten notebook of a Province Military Affairs Section cadre. The last dated entry was December 1965.
according to a captured Viet Cong after action report, the 514th was overrun in its Ap Bac/Nhi Binh camp by elements of the U.S. 9th Infantry Division.* That this particular area should be the site of repeated battles suggests the importance of the territory as a springboard for the support of Viet Cong operations in Dinh Tuong.

As a final note on strategic geography in the province, that portion of central Dinh Tuong between the Mekong River and National Highway 4 as it runs west from My Tho, bordered on the east by the commercial canal that runs north from the Mekong into the Plain of Reeds to the Stone Pagoda canal intersection and on the west by National Highway 4 as it turns south again toward the Mekong near Cai Be, is treasured by the Viet Cong as the 20/7 "heartland" zone, named for the 20 July date of signing of the Geneva Accords in 1954. Until 1964, no district-sized GVN presence was exerted in this area, and government forces confined themselves to maintaining the security of National Highway 4 running east and west through this area. In view of the acute importance of keeping the highway connecting Saigon with the Delta open and secure, the attention of the government's district forces was focused on villages bordering on the highway and by default the heartland 20/7 area was left to become Viet Cong controlled territory.

Not only was the 20/7 heartland area increasingly under Viet Cong control but it also became a basing area for Viet Cong activity elsewhere in the province. During 1964-65 eighteen Viet Cong military campsites were in use

---

*Minutes of the Criticism Session on the Counter-Sweep Operation of 3 May 1967, no date.
in the 20/7 area. My Long, the geographical center of the area, was also the main station on the Viet Cong line of communications connecting the rice basket provinces to the south with Viet Cong operations to the north. Thus, the government and the Viet Cong were operating non-competitive but intersecting lines of communications: the government was maintaining east-west communications along the highway from My Tho to the west and the Viet Cong were maintaining north-south communications through the same area.

The burden of this summary of the strategic geography of Dinh Tuong is that the province itself occupies a strategically important stretch of land along the north branch of the Mekong River, that communications routes essential to the Viet Cong cross the province in a north-south direction, that control of certain territory in the province is regarded by the Viet Cong as vital to ensure these communication lines and to ensure that lines of retreat to and of sally from safe havens such as the Plain of Reeds are kept open, and that natural barriers -- the Mekong River and the Plain of Reeds -- tend to limit the patterns of Viet Cong activity.
III. THE POLITICAL ARM

In examining the organizational mechanism of the Viet Cong, with a view to seeking out synapses that are critical to the well-being of the system, attention is inevitably drawn to district and village organizations and to the links between them.* District and village political cadres must operate within the territorial area of their assignment, and are thus more readily identified than are provincial and regional level cadres, whose influence radiates down through secure channels and whose presence in any threatened area is fleeting.** Hamlet cadres may be more visible, but would also appear to be more expendable, less committed to the movement, less highly trained, and more readily replaced.

---

* Obviously, provincial and regional organizations, the higher echelon elements that generate policy, motivation, and leadership, are more critical to the whole system than lower echelon elements, but their personnel seldom risk capture. Their movements are less confined as to territory and their relative anonymity gives them greater security.

** DT-144, Q. 56, 88, and 96. (Interview number 144 in the Dinh Tuong series, responses to questions 56, 88, and 96.) The subject was a clerk typist in Region II headquarters who was captured when he returned to his home village "on leave" in 1966. He indicated that Region II headquarters was located adjacent to the Cambodian border, heavily defended, and operated under close security controls. Even the functions of personnel were held in secret from one another: "I was not allowed to go to the other offices to visit and talk to the staff members there....The Front kept the functions of its various cadres secret, because it feared they might be murdered by the people working in the region."
SELECTION AND TRAINING OF CADRES

If the Viet Cong investment in training and experience of hamlet level operatives is superficial, the situation at the village level and above is different. The requirements for training and experience are considerably stiffer and the standards of performance are correspondingly higher. * Village and district cadres must oversee the critical job of translating general policy directives and quota targets (often grossly unrealistic) from higher echelons into reality. Planners at regional and provincial levels formulate policy and establish quotas; workers at the district-village level have to transform these policies into actuality and meet the imposed quotas. ** To train cadres to the level of organizational and leadership skills required to operate effectively in this demanding role is a task of considerable magnitude.

* A village secretary (DT-99) who rallied in 1965 reported that he had attended five training courses since 1960, one of which lasted for six months and included on-the-job training with the 514th Battalion, Province Local Force. A peasant who rose to be deputy chief of section at district level (DT-135) mentioned being sent to a training course in 1962 on armed propaganda activities that lasted for eight months. In September of 1963, he was sent to Tay Ninh province on the Cambodian border for another year of training (including six months travel to and from Tay Ninh) to prepare him for work at province and district levels.

** Since 1963, organizational changes have occurred in the district-village relationship, notably the setting up of an intervening layer of command and control, partly motivated by the need to decentralize in the face of GVN pacification efforts. These are discussed more fully in the chapter on VC reactions to pacification, notably pp. 80-96.
Viet Cong criteria for the selection of village cadres present advantages as well as disadvantages for the system. The most important advantage is that all cadres at the village (and hamlet) level are natives of their jurisdiction. Familiarity with local people and problems is an important prerequisite for successfully adapting general policies to local conditions. The Viet Cong cadre is often faced by a GVN opposite number who has been chosen on the basis of education, political suitability, and, more often, personal loyalty -- considerations which often take precedence over the traditional practice of selecting a local notable of the village.

The Viet Cong have reversed this class basis for selection of local leaders, by restricting the selection of local cadres to poor farmers or politically acceptable members of the vaguely defined "middle farmer" class. Coming from a lower stratum of society they tend to be less educated than the wealthier village elements, and often less adaptable to formal education. Far from presenting a problem, this situation is one which the VC find quite congenial. To implant a few basic ideas on a tabula rasa, relatively uncluttered by conflicting teachings, helps to eliminate confusion and uncertainty, and assures some uniformity in the ideological outlook of VC lower level cadres. To structure reality for less sophisticated minds leaves a more lasting impression, particularly when it is imbedded by incessant repetition, and gives voice to inchoate political urges which have hitherto been unable to find expression.
As the cadre advances to progressively higher echelons, the criteria for selection become more rigorous and the training requirements become more intensive. Training is closely related to function: each participant in the system is given only that amount of training and indoctrination needed for effective performance of his assigned functions, and no more. Thus, the cadre who rises in the system represents a steadily expanding Viet Cong investment in his training and experience. He becomes increasingly valuable as qualified and trained replacements become more difficult to produce. Attrition and the stepped up tempo of the war make it more difficult for the VC to allow themselves the luxury of sending critically needed cadres to three-, six-, and nine-month training courses.

CADRE ACTIVITIES

Village cadres, who are the enforcers of policy handed down from above, are busy men. Their functions are time-consuming and involve a great deal of face-to-face communication. These enforcers of policy must move from hamlet to hamlet, encouraging, reinforcing, overseeing, checking, collecting, and proselytizing. Village Chapter organizations are in theory required to meet at least once a month. These meetings must be prepared for; Village Secretaries must consult with their staff sections and colleagues in advance; and the meetings themselves are protracted affairs. At least annually, and usually semi-annually, cadres must also take short indoctrination courses on Party policy and objectives, which they must subsequently explain to the people, not only at mass propaganda meetings when these can be held
but also in individual or small group sessions to reinforce the lesson of the day. In addition, for special objectives or campaigns, cadres must again take indoctrination courses and prepare themselves to pass the information acquired to the people. Each section of the Party Chapter organization has functions that require meeting with specific groups. For example, one interviewee reported that in 1965 Labor Youth meetings were held at least twice a month in his village.*

Reporting is another levy upon cadre time. At the end of each month, frequently on the 25th, a regular report is submitted to the district level by the Village Party Secretary. He and his staff prepare the report from his daily log and from the monthly reports he receives in triplicate from his functional sections, in turn based on their reports from the hamlet level or on personal observation.** Village functional section leaders are expected to report daily to Village Party Secretaries, although during quiet periods this requirement may be treated casually.***

During special campaigns, Village Secretaries must report every day on such matters as military activities in their area, indoctrination sessions held for villagers, the number of spike pits dug, and the like. Concluding each special campaign, a report is submitted dealing with the weak and strong points of the campaign and a thorough

* DT-223, Q. 21.
*** DT-135, Q. 15.
analysis of the people's morale, called the "Composite Report on the People's State of Mind."\* 

In a society in which literacy is limited and in which face-to-face consultations and oral tradition are strong, it becomes apparent that these activities are time-demanding in nature. Personal leadership in these relationships is of high importance. For example, one interviewee reported that when the leader and assistant leader of his district labor youth organization were killed in a sweep in 1965, the organization broke up because for the want of a sufficiently skilled replacement. The remaining assistant head of the district section proved unequal to the task.\** 

This illustration is not cited to suggest the fragility of a particular element of the Viet Cong organization, but rather to suggest the necessity that skilled persons be available to invest time and energy in the continuing process of consultation and coordination that characterizes healthy organizations, whether in developed or underdeveloped societies.

**BASIC ORGANIZATION STRUCTURE**

Viet Cong organization in a village will vary widely, depending upon the degree of VC control, but the functions performed are similar. The Viet Cong ideal would be realized if a Village Party Committee (Xa Uy), with thirty or more party members operating subsidiary party chapters in the hamlets, could be set up in every village. In Dinh Tuong,

\*DT-135, Q. 9.
\**DT-135, Q. 369-372.
however, it is unusual to find a Village Party Committee except in very strongly controlled and heavily populated areas. Most villages do not have the party membership to support more than one party chapter. (Figure 2 shows a typical village political organization.)

* Sometimes translated as Standing Committee. In North Vietnam, the term "Thuong Truc," (Permanent or Standing Committee) is used, but the term "Thuong Vu" or "day to day affairs" is used in the South.

Fig. 2—Village party organization
Most frequently, a Village Party Chapter (Chi Bo Xa) is the ruling organ of the "liberated" or controlled portions of a village. A group of such chapters will look for guidance to an outside Party Committee aggregating a number of Party Chapters in its territorial jurisdiction. Thus, they might take their guidance directly from a District Party Committee or in some instances from an intervening intra-village organization which would act as the territorial agent for the District Committee.

Availability of trustworthy manpower determines the level of organization. With three members in a village, a Village Party Chapter can be formed. Nine members qualifies it to form a Village Party Chapter Committee (Chi Uy), and thirty enables the formation of a Village Party Committee (Xa Uy).

As do Party Committees at higher echelons, the Village Party Chapter Committee has at least nine members. The Party Chapter Secretary, his deputy, and the Member in charge of Current Affairs make up the Current Affairs Section as the leading administrative element. Other major functional sections include: Military Affairs, Military Proselyting, Security, Propaganda-Indoctrination, and Finance-Economy, with special sections added for specific tasks as necessary. (Figure 3 shows the usual administrative organization of a Village Party Chapter.) In addition, functional elements tied into the Party Chapter deal with Village Liberation Women's, Farmers', and Youths' Associations.

In general, these functional breakdowns are preserved at higher levels of party organization, with the functional elements increasingly structured at successively higher
Fig. 3—Village party chapter administrative sections
levels. At the lower echelons of the Viet Cong system, more diversity in organizational form and administrative procedures are encountered. The practice of assigning cadres to hold down several jobs at a time somewhat limits the utility of organizational charts, since they suggest uniformity in an organization that is fluid and in which the organizational responses are quite flexible.

ALTERNATE LEVELS: DIRECTING, MONITORING, EXECUTING

The Viet Cong political system would appear to operate as a hierarchy of alternating strata. The central level organization (South Vietnam) establishes broad policies and directives; the regional level (in this instance a group of six provinces that includes Dinh Tuong) monitors the execution of policy by Province Committees; in turn, the province level prepares specific directives which are monitored by District Committees; and at the village level political action is actually implemented. More than one respondent has given evidence that the Viet Cong regard their system as operating in this manner, but a single citation will serve to illustrate the point:

...at Central echelon they put forth the policies and issue the directives and, at Region, they are only responsible for checking up and making sure that they are carried out by the Province which is an executing level, and must draw up specific directives for the province which are passed on to Village and monitored by District. District is only responsible for checking the progress of villages and pressing them to carry out the directives by constant reminders....(DT-109, Q. 278.)

In this view a central office for South Vietnam is the supreme decision-making body, while the Region Committee
is the bridge between it and the Province Committees. In the Province Committee, the national level decisions, possibly tailored somewhat at the regional level, would be recast and formulated into specific objectives for the District Committee to attain by apportioning the load among its villages.

Viet Cong organizational structuring is, as interpreted here, consistent with the fundamental ideological doctrine of demanding superhuman efforts of the people. Strong ideology enables a person to overcome all difficulties. The separation of policy formulation, monitoring, and execution has certain practical advantages in maintaining revolutionary momentum. If the same element that formulates policy is also responsible for executing it, the tendency is toward conservatism. The realities of the situation and the difficulties of execution are inevitably brought home to the planners. If each echelon were equally responsible for making policy and implementing it, plans and programs would be tailored to that which seems possible.

On the other hand, if grandiose objectives are formulated and passed down the organizational chain to be executed, failure can safely be attributed to deficiencies in execution and lack of revolutionary zeal. In order to keep revolutionary spirit flowing through the system, unrestrained voluntarism must be injected at critical stages in the process, with final responsibility for execution passed on to subordinate echelons.

In practice, like any other bureaucracy, the Viet Cong system demands as much skill, work, and realism at the top as at the bottom. High level cadres and planners are realistic enough to know that their monitors in the districts and
enforcers in the villages will often be unable or unwilling to meet policy goals. At times, they will tolerate exaggerated reports of success from the villages and districts in order to maintain the zeal of the lower level cadres. To maintain momentum in the system takes precedence over accuracy in reporting. It does not follow, however, that high level cadres are unaware of unpalatable facts or unable to adjust policies to accommodate to conditions faced by lower level leaders.

TERRITORIAL UNITY OF COMMAND

Another important characteristic of the Viet Cong system is unity of command at each territorial echelon. In spite of recurring propaganda about the imminence of setting up a government in "liberated" areas, presumably to provide an administrative organization paralleling that of the Party, this has not yet been done, at least not in Dinh Tuong. Nor is there evidence of a military chain of command separate from local Party control; instead, village guerrillas operate under control of the Village Party Secretary, province (Local Force) units under control of the party organ at province level, and regional (Main Force) units under directions from regional party headquarters. In each geographical jurisdiction of the system, one man is for practical purposes in charge of all activities in that area, military as well as political. The command structure of the system is essentially that of the Party.

*D. W. P. Elliott and C. A. H. Thomson have usefully characterized Viet Cong cadres as "movers," "enforcers," and "little brothers," in which the movers set policy, the enforcers see that it is carried out, and the little brothers actually do the work. **DT-151, Q. 62.
A Region Party Committee provides guidance for the six upper delta provinces (Central Nam Bo). The Secretary of the Region Party Committee issues directives in the name of the Region Party Committee or occasionally upon his own authority. As indicated previously, however, the regional level headquarters is remote, close to the Cambodian border, and the time required for travel and the need for providing close security for high level regional cadres means that regional cadres seldom appear at the scene of local action.

At the province level, command is exercised through the Province Party Committee. As with all Party organs, the Party Secretary is the plenipotentiary commander in his zone of responsibility. The core leadership element, as in the village, is collectively referred to as the Current Affairs Section. Heads of functional sections of the Province Party Committee may have general responsibilities for monitoring territorial areas in addition to overseeing specialized activities throughout the province.

The District Party Committee is strikingly similar to the province organization above it and the village organization below it. Again, the Secretary of the District Committee is the responsible commander. Although the range of specialized sections at the district level is narrower than at the provincial level and its facilities are limited, it is still the district that provides the

* The Province Party Committee that deals with Dinh Tuong is the "My Tho Province Party Committee," since the Viet Cong's My Tho Province includes both government provinces of Dinh Tuong and Go Cong.

** The VC Chau Thanh District includes two GVN districts, Chau Thanh and Ben Tranh.
indispensable link between the province, where national and regional policies are formulated into concise objectives, and the villages that must ultimately bear the burden of attaining these goals.

At the village level the Secretary of the Party Chapter is also clearly in charge. In principle, all direction from above, technical as well as political, must be coordinated with the Village Party Secretary.

Whenever a district cadre from a specialized branch came down to the village...to...point out good and bad points...the district cadre had to see the Village Party Secretary first.... (DT-177, Q-157)

Some exceptions occur in non-military activities:

Lai Nam...sent the district cadres down to the villages to meet directly with the Executive Committees of the Village Farmers' Association. (DT-153, Q. 112)

In discussing military matters, however, this pattern is firmly adhered to:

Whenever a cadre from the District Military Affairs Section came to the village to do something, he had to meet the Party Secretary and the Military Affairs Section chief first of all....The Party Chapter Secretary was the leader in every field, and all the directives and resolutions...had to go through him first. (DT-148, Q. 96)

THE SECURITY CHANNEL

Although special missions may be performed in a village by district cadres supervising the execution of specific programs within their particular sphere of competence,
usually cleared in advance with the Village Party Secretary, a more general if limited exception to the principle of territorial unity of command is found in the work of the Security Section. Performing a watchdog function within the Party as well as among the controlled population, the Security Section has some direct access to higher authority. Full control by the Party Secretary of the security element in his same echelon would negate the value of the security branch as a somewhat independent observer and a counterbalance to the Party Secretary. An interview with a village cadre revealed that:

If there is an essentially important matter requiring absolute secrecy, the district security cadre himself will go down to the village to present the matter verbally to the head of the Village Security Section, and will not use the form of a written report. (DT-239, Q. 67)

The need for secrecy and a privileged channel of communication to higher echelons is implicit in the role of the Security Section, which operates both overtly and covertly. Even the expression "to operate openly" was characterized by a former Deputy Head of a Village Security Section, in reference to a hamlet security section, as meaning that only the Chairman of the Hamlet Farmers' Association Committee and the Party Chapter Secretary were informed at ten day intervals on the section's activities. Further, this degree of "openness" was only possible in villages where the "Front was strong," elsewhere, security sections operated almost totally under cover. Either the head of the Security Section or one of his deputies was responsible for recruiting and operating the covert security
network, the members of which were not known to one another
or to the other deputies to the head of the Security Section.

Coordination of this covert security network with the
almost equally undercover network of the Military Prosely-
ting Section, and of these two covert operations with the
work of the Military Affairs Section, which also necessi-
tates close security, was a demanding and time-consuming
task. To illustrate the problems presented:

...when a Troop Proselyting cadre contacted a
GVN soldier, he had to report to the Security
Section, so that this section wouldn't report
mistakenly to the higher authorities that he
was in contact with the GVN and was a GVN spy.
On the other hand, when a security cadre found
out that a GVN soldier wanted to defect to the
Front, he had to report to the Troop Proselyting
Section so that this section could contact the
soldier and proselyte him and, at the same time,
inform the Front forces in the area so that
they wouldn't shoot at the soldier by mistake.
(DT-194, Q. 4)

These three sections had to consult frequently through
their overt staff members to avoid "stepping on each
other's toes" and to increase the effectiveness of their
operations.

Members of the Security Section are particularly in-
formative sources because they are required to maintain
detailed dossiers on village personnel, including Party
Chapter members. The secret agents of the security network
keep close tabs on the 15-20 families that are normally
assigned to each agent for surveillance. Comprehensive
dossiers are kept by the Security Section and filed by
"category." The "A" category comprises those who do not
have to be watched closely. The "B" category is made up
of those constantly watched fence sitters who tend to shift allegiance toward the side that they perceive to be winning. The "C" category contains the so-called "dangerous elements" that must be watched at every step. Hamlet chiefs and family heads who had once worked for the GVN and persons suspected of acting as agents or spies for the GVN are listed in this surveillance category and their responses to Front requests, performance of tasks, payment of taxes, and attitudes toward the Front are recorded in detail.

THE VIET CONG MILITARY UMBRELLA

Within this province and within this system, certain cadres perform functions that are vital to system effectiveness. These are the movers and enforcers who give leadership to the villagers and who provide the links between the districts and the villages. In that these men must move from place to place to conduct the intensive face-to-face communications and consultations that characterize Viet Cong activities, their success depends to a large extent on their being able to feel personally secure. This is not just physical security, which can often be obtained by avoiding the scene of action; rather what is needed is that sense of security that enables them to go about their business of collecting taxes, arranging for corvée labor to build the rough fortifications from which VC military units prefer to fight, holding mass propaganda meetings, and conducting the whole range of support, communications, and intelligence functions that enhance VC military effectiveness. Even without a strong Viet Cong military presence, the GVN has difficulty taking these critical cadres into custody. They
are hard to identify and tend to go to cover whenever GVN units enter their areas. The presence, or even rumors, of large Viet Cong units tend to create an umbrella of security against GVN small unit operations that might interdict the activities of essential cadres. In practice, the size of force that ARVN commanders have in the past considered safe to use in entering an area where VC forces were reportedly active was too big and cumbersome to endanger the political cadres. Judging from interview data, the latter received early warning and retired to safe locations until things quieted down. Since sizable operations were expensive and time-consuming, a GVN presence might be exerted three or four times a year in a given area of Viet Cong dominance during 1964 or 1965, a frequency that presented few problems for VC political cadres.

The villager's fear of retaliation is also a significant factor in ensuring the safety of political cadres. One lesson of the last twenty years in the Vietnamese countryside is that it pays to keep your mouth shut. But again, it is the presence of VC armed units which enables the political cadres initially to set up and subsequently to maintain a surveillance system as well as a mechanism for reprisals. In the so-called "pacified" areas, the threat of reprisals still contributes to the safety of the political cadres, but not to the point that it allows them to operate at will.

In sum, the Viet Cong political organization is a carefully articulated and regular structure, with strong similarities in function and design from one organization level to the next. It provides an understandable organizational framework for the cooperation of people of widely
varying talents to perform functions tailored to their capabilities. In fact, all but the most marginal participants in the movement reveal detailed knowledge of how the political structure at their level operates. The system quickly rewards persons of lowly origin who demonstrate skills and organizational loyalty and is even able to make use of persons of lesser skills whose backgrounds suggest that they are capable of only limited commitment to revolutionary goals. Persons capable of advancement to leadership posts are given training commensurate with their capabilities, which in many cases may be repeated and time-consuming. It can be said that the strength of the political organization derives from its command and administration. The organization has shaped its men, not the reverse. Finally, the political organization and the military organization are melded into what appears as a political-military system. Each is dependent upon the other at many points: each is made more effective because of the support received from the other.
IV. MILITARY BALANCE, TERRITORIAL CONTROL, AND STRATEGY

That the Viet Cong place great emphasis on maintaining a balanced relationship between the three types of forces -- Guerrillas, Local Force, and Main Force -- rather than opting to concentrate manpower in one force at the expense of the others, indicates the importance to them of continuity in these interdependent structures. Even during the late 1964-1965 period when the Delta was being bled of manpower by the demands for a Main Force buildup in Central Vietnam and the Iron Triangle area, a great if largely unsuccessful effort was made to maintain the balance of forces.

Viet Cong strategists divide South Vietnam into three areas, the mountains, the delta, and the urban areas.* A variant of this "Three Region" formula refers to zones of control within any one of the geographical areas. Thus, within Dinh Tuong province, the Viet Cong identify the "extended liberated zone," the "temporarily liberated zone," and the "weak zone." While these correspond roughly to the US/GVN classification of Viet Cong-controlled, contested, and GVN-controlled areas, the Viet Cong, at least in formal statements, do not concede the government even the semantic victory of admitting government control over any areas.

*The Viet Cong adhere to the Chinese Communist precept of primacy of military action in the mountains, balance of military and political action in the delta, and primacy of political action in the cities. The Tet offensive was remarkable as a departure from this precept.
Government-controlled areas are characterized by the Viet Cong as "weak areas" and, as such, ripe targets for future activities.

Inevitably, each zone of control generates different problems for the Viet Cong, which are met by varying policies. In the liberated zone, Viet Cong programs are executed in a blunt and uncompromising manner. "Liberated" people are assumed to be more "enlightened" than their counterparts in areas of lesser VC control; hence, recalcitrance and resistance to Viet Cong programs is a greater sin. Where control is not absolute, more delicate "political" measures are employed. Persuasion rather than compulsion is considered the correct strategy for areas of weak control.*

The relationship between armed force and territorial control is complex. Initially, armed force is used to break the control of the opposition. Guerrillas or Local Force elements act in an armed propaganda role. They accompany political cadres both to protect them and as a show of force. Usually they succeed in giving the impression of a much larger force than is actually the case. When political organization begins to take root, it provides a jumping off point for military operations into adjacent areas for the armed units. The armed units, in turn, protect the political apparatus, and enable it to consolidate

*There is an interesting parallel between the harsher policies in VC controlled areas and the conviction of many interview subjects, based on firsthand experience with the Viet Minh, that when a government is set up (the prerequisite being complete territorial control of the administrative area) the velvet glove comes off the iron hand.
and further expand its control. The two elements of this mutually supporting relationship might be termed the "springboard" and the "threshold" concepts.

The "springboard" concept derives from the insistence of Viet Cong strategists on operating "with two legs." One leg is planted in the base area, while the other walks tentatively through the contested and weak areas.* Much attention is paid to the use of base areas as "springboards" or as stepping stones giving entry into a zone of lesser Viet Cong control. Viet Cong documents also show great sensitivity toward "enemy encroachments into their areas, for these encroachments expand the "enemy's" base of operations and provide jump-off points closer to areas of strong VC control that menace the very base areas that serve as the foundation for VC political-military operations. The "springboard" is a two-edged sword. Used by one's own forces, it is an indispensable prerequisite for further expansion. Used by the opposition, it threatens the very foundations of one's own position.

Consolidation and expansion are the two major elements of the Viet Cong strategy for territorial control. Without a consolidated base area, further territorial expansion is difficult. Without territorial expansion, the existing base areas are endangered. The patterns of Viet Cong expansion of military base areas and the areas selected for military operations reflect the springboard concept at work.

---

*To stand on "two legs" most often refers to having a strong foothold in the mountain base areas, while engaging in mobile operations in the Delta. This concept applies to the conditions of I Corps and II Corps in Central Vietnam. It is, however, also used in the sense mentioned here.
Starting from an inhospitable base area in the Plain of Reeds, where many of the political cadres stayed during the "six years of peace," armed activity began to fan out into areas north of Highway 4. The history of the Viet Cong 514th Local Force Battalion mentions that early operations (in 1958-1959) were designed to support the political movement in the area closest to the old Viet Minh stronghold area of Hau My, the "gateway to the Plain of Reeds."

The importance of the Plain of Reeds base area to the Viet Cong cannot be overemphasized. The French early experienced the frustration of operating in an area where ground operations by conventional units are extremely difficult. The Viet Minh satirized the French efforts to flush them out of this area in a jingle, the gist of which was, "It's easy to enter the Plain of Reeds, but getting out is another story." Most of the operations of the Viet Cong's 514th Local Force Battalion in the 1960-62 period were within relatively easy striking distance from the Plain of Reeds, with the exception of a brief excursion into Go Cong Province to support the political movement there, and secure a foothold east of My Tho.

The military activity of this early period shows a clear pattern. First, priority was given to selecting and consolidating points of egress from the Plain of Reeds. This was done by operations around the Hau My area in the northwest and the intersection of two commercial canals at the Stone Buddha pagoda in north central Dinh Tuong. Next,

*Untitled handwritten notebook of a Dinh Tuong Province Military Affairs Section cadre. The last entry is December 1966.
a stepping stone to the rich and heavily populated 20/7 area south of National Highway 4 was needed. From the Hau My exit, Hoi Cu village appeared to serve this function, and from the Stone Buddha pagoda egress the link with the 20/7 zone was Ap Bac hamlet in Nhi Binh village.

A further necessity was to create a safe route to the three VC districts east of My Tho, two of which are in Go Cong province. Terrain offered only two possible routes across the National Highway, and one of these was dangerously close to heavily controlled GVN areas. The operations in the "Tan Family" area, the cluster of villages whose names contain the prefix "Tan," most of which border on a province road running south from Phu My to the National Highway, were probably aimed at securing a hold on this bottleneck giving access to areas east of My Tho.*

From the steady seepage of Viet Cong military units out of their base area, to the high tide of military activities in 1964 and 1965, several patterns emerge. The first pattern is the method of expansion of the area of operation of concentrated units. The initial surge of activities during the 1960-62 period was necessary to support the development of political control and logistical support throughout the province, but could not long be sustained without a firm base-liaison structure. It was not until the Ap Bac and Hoi Cu springboards were solidified that access to and withdrawal from the 20/7 area for large units was assured.

The "three types of forces" concept of territorial expansion is like a wedge, with the village guerrillas

---

*DT-135, Q. 409.
backed by Local Force units detailed by the Province Party Committee moving into prospective base areas and clearing the way for larger units. When the base area has been properly prepared, and a springboard established, the heavy regional units (Main Force) move in to add authority to the threat of strong Viet Cong retaliation to GVN encroachments on the base area, and to pose a stronger threat to the GVN areas surrounding the base complex. Then the advance edge of the wedge moves forward again and repeats the same process. Large units cannot operate in the open Delta terrain until the problems of access and withdrawal, as well as the preparation of fortified defenses against ARVN attacks have been attended to. Once moved in, the area threatened by their presence expands, and the GVN troops available to counter the cutting edge of the Local Force are "pinned down" by the increase in area coverage required of them.

Activities in the Tan Family area and a series of attacks in 1963-64 were aimed at clearing out a safe route to connect the Plain of Reeds with the eastern districts. A comparison of the development of attack patterns of the 514th and 261st units with the liaison and supply route that was essentially completed by 1965 indicates a direct connection between the two. These attacks may have had the immediate effect of neutralizing local GVN security efforts and, thus, protecting the civilian cadre organization in their efforts to consolidate control over the local population.

Nevertheless, the points at which military activity was employed to support political population control operations seem to have been selected as much on the basis
of their strategic location as for the ripeness of the internal situation of these villages for such action. The counterinsurgency maxim that the insurgents are after people and not territory seems considerably to overstate the case.

The 514th Bn was, as the many references to the Region and Province Party Committees indicate, responding to directives of the political leadership. The goals of its actions, and those of the Region Main Force 261st Bn, were not simply military in nature, not solely concerned with "closing with and destroying the enemy." They were initially coordinated with Party requirements for building up strength to expand its area of control. Thus the 514th Bn was an outstanding example of a major policy statement that:

Local Force (district and province) must be understood as an armed instrument of the local Party headquarters, responsible for the execution of political and armed missions in the area concerned, and for instigating the local people to fight the enemy in the three fields, military, political and military proselyting.*

Following Mao Tse Tung, the Viet Cong assert that the initial stage of small guerrilla bands armed with rudimentary weapons must eventually be either supplemented or superseded by a mobile warfare phase leading to the general counteroffensive. In their view, the guerrilla bands must either grow or wither on the vine. Thus, the Viet Cong place great emphasis on the concentration and development of their guerrilla forces.

---

*Document from the Inter-Region V Conference on Guerrilla Warfare, December 1963, titled "Mission and Guideline for District and Province Local Units." MAC-V document log #11-43, FOUO.
Concentration and increase in size, however, are counter-balanced by a proportionate loss in flexibility and speed of movement. A large military unit cannot disappear as easily as a small band of lightly equipped guerrillas. Logistics requirements place an increasing limitation on the movements of the concentrated unit. Preservation of secrecy, concealment by terrain features and avoidance of GVN strongpoints except in the case of a carefully staged attack, further limit the choice of movement routes for these units. Most importantly, the strategic objectives of the Main Force units impose a limitation on the activities of these units. The prime function of the concentrated units is to wear down the enemy while conserving their own forces for the general counteroffensive. This policy dictates conservative tactics on the part of the unit commander.

The development of friendly and enemy forces in guerrilla warfare, as practiced in Vietnam, has given rise to the rubric "war without a front." The Viet Cong characterize this development metaphorically as the "interlocking comb teeth position." An interesting description of this is offered by General Vo Nguyen Giap:

With the forms of guerrilla fighting and mobile fighting, and owing to the enemy's conditions and ours in strength, shaping up of force and topography, etc., there appeared on the battlefronts the situation of free zones interlacing with enemy-controlled areas, intersecting and encircling one another.... The strategy of long-term war and the guiding principle of fighting from guerrilla war gradually moving to regular war with forms of guerrilla warfare, mobile warfare, including entrenched camp warfare, were very successful experiences of our national liberation war.

This statement is noteworthy in that it mentions two
elements of guerrilla warfare that deserve special attention. The first is the interlaced deployment of friendly and enemy forces and the second is the reference to entrenched camp warfare.

The "interlocking comb teeth" metaphor is used by the Viet Cong to describe interlacing friendly and enemy positions. It is characteristic of the stage of mobile warfare, which is, by Viet Cong definition, a stage of equilibrium or balance of forces in which both sides confront each other from positions of relative equality, with territorial boundaries tacitly understood by both sides. By 1965, the Viet Cong had advanced from the stage of guerrilla warfare to a combination of guerrilla and mobile warfare involving concentrated forces of up to regimental strength. A general, although unwritten, consensus seemed to operate on the rules of engagement, stemming from an admixture of habit, convenience, and limitations on the capabilities of both sides. The game of chess offers an analogy. A pawn can only move one square: the GVN Popular Force goes out of its post only during the day. The bishop must only move diagonally: Viet Cong units are confined to lines of march that keep careful distance from GVN posts.

General Giap's term, "entrenched camp warfare," which he uses to describe attacks on fortified government positions, is almost equally applicable to Viet Cong military units. The GVN fortifies its areas of control with military posts. The Viet Cong fortify theirs with defensively prepared positions. Viet Cong units require rest points where they can sleep and recover from their fatiguing night marches and a prepared fortified position in these
areas where they can defend themselves if attacked. Both sides share similarities in their security requirements and both sides come to essentially the same solution -- construction of a prepared fortified position. The primary difference is that the ARVN man their posts on a continuous basis, while the Viet Cong units move from one fortified position to another.

Given the precarious nature of military security arising from the "interlocking comb teeth" position of both sides, the selection of base areas for Viet Cong units must be done with great care. This relationship is not quite a war without a front; it is a war with many fronts, as well as a war with definite rear base areas (despite the logical implication that a war without a front must also be a war without a rear). The Viet Cong base areas are interspersed between GVN controlled areas and communication routes. The preservation of Viet Cong units is related to their success in concealing their location from the opposition and, if discovered, ensuring that they are in a favorable position to resist attack.

"Preservation of secrecy," as the Viet Cong term their efforts to conceal information on the location and disposition of their military units, is a paramount objective since, as noted above, it multiplies the effect of the threat of the presence of these units, and is necessary for the preservation of the strength of these units. For this reason, the security organization of the population surrounding the base areas must be thoroughly done. The minimum support required by Viet Cong units moving through populated areas is the passive cooperation of the villagers in maintaining the secrecy of their movements.
A second necessity is that the work of logistical support which a large unit requires must not create ripples that reach the areas of GVN surveillance. To do this, active cooperation of villagers on a wide scale is required both to split the purchase of large quantity of food into many small purchases by village sympathizers and to have villagers keep sufficient rice on hand to sell to the troops when they arrive in the village, so that a sudden tell-tale increase in the volume of sales in GVN market areas can be avoided.

...the VC asked the people to keep their rice reserves for them. Each family kept from 15 to 30 gia...Usually, liaison agents or reconnaissance agents went a day ahead of the unit to take care of the supply problem....(DT-140, Q. 107 and 109)

The same source indicated that a directive was issued in February 1966 ordering the people to maintain 15 to 30 gia of rice in reserve, to be paid for with money or with VC troop support bonds. VC troops in small units were also given per diem in piasters to buy food through agents or sympathizers from local food shops.*

Other village services, directed toward supporting a unit engaged in actual combat, are the organization of civilian teams for transporting wounded troops and ammunition, and evacuating the dead from the battlefield. Organizing the civilian population to meet these requirements is the task of the local Village Party Chapter, with occasional assistance from specialized cadres higher up in the system. One such cadre, a province security

*DT-137, Q. 170; DT-141, Q. 142.
cadre, tells of his role in searching out potential camp-site base areas in the 20/7 Zone:

In 1962, Chin Duc of the province Security Section leadership attached me to the province unit to see which villages had terrain favorable for stationing troops....

First, when I got to the village, I contacted the local organization to see whether or not the people's attitude was favorable or hostile, and how many families had contacts in both (VC and GVN) zones, how many local inns there were, and how many "complicated" (e.g. untrustworthy) people go back and forth to trade, and put them under surveillance. Militarily, I had to discover the patterns of GVN activity; how the small units were, how many pinpoint small operations they conducted, and how often they hit the right targets.

After having completed these two tasks, I proposed to the village cadres that they call the villagers together and have them engage in civic tasks like digging fortification trenches and fixing up bridges and roads, so that in the future it would provide a (favorable) battlefield. While this was being done, I could see immediately what the people's reaction was and could assign people to keep an eye on those who reacted unfavorably....

In summary, it is not only a question of stationing troops anywhere the terrain permits. If there is a military action planned somewhere, the security cadres have to come in first and probe the GVN police and spy machinery in the countryside to see whether it is strong or weak. (DT-248)

The emphasis on continuity in the expansion of the political structure is paralleled by the emphasis on continuity in the expansion of military activities. The strategy of military development is that:

Concentration will be made step by step, from three man cells in (a) squad, and then from squads into (b) platoon. Development of local guerrillas must
follow the same (method). Concentration must be undertaken at the proper time.*

It is significant that the 514th Bn initially operated in platoons, assigned to different areas, and did not concentrate as a company until June 1961 when, as the document says, there was "...the Military Affairs Section at village and district, so that we had the three types of forces in the province." It was not until early 1962 when the village and district forces were a squad to a platoon strong that the Region Main Force 261st Bn was set up. Throughout the buildup of military forces, great attention was paid to expanding all three forces simultaneously.

Territorially, the area of operation of the 514th Local Force Battalion only expanded as solid bases were established as jumping off points. And, in addition to this geographical continuum, emphasis was placed upon interlocking the successive tiers of military units. The Main Force provided the threat that kept the GVN from exclusively pursuing the Local Force, and the Local Force neutralized small unit GVN operations against the Guerrillas. The Guerrillas, in addition to supplying manpower for Local and Main Force units, protected the logistics areas and campsites of these units.**

The three types of forces give the Viet Cong a

---


** For a full discussion of these inter-relationships, see "Inter-Region V Conference," op. cit.
capability that has, in other contexts, been termed "flexible response." Different situations require different levels of military action. For large offensive operations, a Main Force unit is required. When, for example, a "big gun" is needed for the completion of a mission, a Region Main Force unit may be called on. A member of the 514th Bn recalled that:

In 1963, the Ba Beo post had a platoon of GVN soldiers. The 514th Bn attacked this post three times in 1963, but didn't succeed in knocking it off. In every attack, the 514th Bn lost from 5 to 10 men. Then, in 1963, the 261st Main Force Battalion came in with 82mm mortars and recoilless rifles and in spite of a strong volume of fire from the post during the assault, finally overran it. Some of the soldiers in the post were killed, some ran, and six were captured....After the attack of the 261st Bn on the Ba Beo post, five hamlets in my village were completely liberated and to this day the GVN has not rebuilt the post. (DT-212, Q. 9)

For small harassments, village Guerrillas may be adequate. The following example illustrates this search for an appropriate and sufficient measure of force to respond to political requirements, and the interaction of three levels -- village, district, and province -- in responding to this requirement.

By February or March 1965, the Tam Hiep Village Chapter reported it had noticed that every morning the PF (Popular Force) soldiers manning Cho Bung military post went out on patrol along the section of road lying between Cho Bung and the Highway. It also suggested that the District Committee send its armed units to mount an ambush. The District Local Force Company was then ordered to reconnoiter the terrain to stage an attack. After it had studied the terrain, the District Local Force did not agree to fight. The reason for this refusal was that that
stretch of road lies in the middle of a large open field which, in military terms, means that there is no safe route of withdrawal for the attackers... But the District Committee, for political reasons of its own, stuck to its resolution, and reported the situation to the 514th Bn to come to its help. This battalion was subsequently ordered to reconnoiter the terrain, but the report it gave the Province Committee was along the same line as the District Local Force company's arguments. (DT-135, Q. 260)

Subsequently, the village Guerrillas who had initially reported the opportunity, hit the target themselves and gained a resounding victory. As the foregoing suggests, in many cases a strategy of adding increments of force until sufficient numerical superiority has been achieved will not work. Open terrain, distance from base areas, availability of civilian support groups, and other factors may negate the value of pure superiority in numbers. A small Guerrilla unit with its speed and flexibility may be a more appropriate military instrument than a large concentrated force. With three types of military force available, village Guerrillas, province Local Force units, or region Main Force battalions, the Viet Cong can use a mix of forces appropriate to the objective, or, as indicated above accomplish the task with any one of the three.

The role of the battalion-sized units in Dinh Tuong, region units as well as the province 514th Local Force Battalion, has been essentially a passive one. It is the potential that they represent, and the threat that they pose, that keeps GVN units tied down in static security roles. More importantly, it poses a threshold of force necessary to enter any area that they are known to frequent; that is, a significant part of Dinh Tuong province, and practically all of the "heartland" area of the 20/7 Zone.
While the region Main Force battalions have been capable of delivering crippling blows, their relatively large size (600-800 men) makes it harder for them to move through contested territory. The province Local Force battalions (450-500 men) are better adapted to this task. From 1960 to 1965, the 514th Local Force battalion was seldom active in the Viet Cong stronghold in the northwestern part of the province bordering on the Plain of Reeds. This is the area of operation of the region battalions and offers relatively easy retreat to a strong safe base. The 514th Battalion has often, however, operated in areas that are cut off from VC strongholds by the heavily guarded National Highway and the Mekong River and areas to the east of My Tho.

That such a large unit can operate in the open terrain of the Delta is good evidence of the careful preparation of base areas and tactics that has laid the groundwork for the peripatetic 514th battalion. A captured document discusses the aspects of operating in the Delta as follows:

B. Our (VC) counter operations defense:

**Advantages:**

- Have initiative in occupying a preselected terrain, organized defensive areas, and we can rely on combat villages. Secrecy can be maintained in deploying troops.

- Familiarity with terrain, in moving and maneuvering troops we have the element of surprise. We can hit from many directions and the three types of troops (Main Force, Local Force and Guerrillas) shake up the enemy.

- It is easy to disperse our forces, avoid contact and retreat.
Disadvantages:
- In combat it is difficult to maneuver, and we are forced to stay in the trenches.
- There is not enough time provided to prepare a thorough defense.
- Due to the open terrain, the enemy air and artillery are effective.
- The area is densely populated and papalm can easily set the ricefields on fire.

It can be seen that the Viet Cong concentrated units rely on the element of surprise, familiarity with the terrain, prepared defensive positions, and ability to disperse to survive in Delta warfare. As against these advantages are the disadvantages of being forced to stay in entrenched positions because of vulnerability to airstrikes and artillery in retreat or maneuver in the open Delta terrain.

That this is essentially a defensive strategy is made even clearer by the following passage from the same document.

- Don't be concerned with any other way of countering (enemy) operations than the defensive form of countering operations.
- Countering operations defensively is not intended to bring victory.
- The essence of defense is not to hold territory but to hold the defensive position.

---

*VC document entitled, "General Concept of Terrain Features in the Central Nam Bo Delta," p. 2, written by the Combat Operations Section of the My Tho Province Military Affairs Section, dated May 23, 1964.

**Ibid., p. 3. The injunction not to hold territory does not mean that Viet Cong units are not responsible for
The foregoing pattern of military activities, balanced carefully against political capabilities and objectives, is a blueprint for cautious expansion. Assured control of territory and of people is basic to continued advance. The Viet Cong "springboard" metaphor usefully characterizes the conservatism of the approach and the need for elaborate preparation before an extension of their control. The "interlocking comb teeth" metaphor similarly characterizes their style of operation in contested areas. Emphasis upon the creation of fortified camps and other infrastructure activity, upon the preservation of secrecy in connection with military movements, and the defensive character of Viet Cong military activity -- except for politically directed offensive sallies from base areas, all suggest elements of vulnerability to which the Viet Cong are sensitive.

Two main elements of weakness can be perceived in the carefully conceived pattern of mutual support between the concentrated Main and Local Force units, and the political organization in the villages. The first is a decline in the credibility of the threat posed by Main and Local Force units, which would reduce the threshold of force required to penetrate Viet Cong controlled ground. Put differently, it is an erosion of the belief that they may run into territorial control. It merely means that they should preserve their own strength by remaining in the protective cover of their immediate position and holding off the enemy operation with minimum cost to themselves ("hold the defensive position") rather than trying to drive the GVN forces out of the area in a costly counterattack. The correct strategy, in the VC view, is to let the operation pass through and subside, and then revert to the passive area defense strategy outlined in this chapter.
sizable Viet Cong units, a belief that inhibits small government units from entering Viet Cong territory in operations directed against the system of political control. The second weak element is the ability of the local population to support Viet Cong forces coming into their area. Inability to furnish food, shelter, information, and the like could stem either from a dwindling of population and resources in an area or from loss of cadre control over the population, or both.
V. REACTIONS TO PACIFICATION

Since World War II, the Viet Minh, and later the Viet Cong, in Dinh Tuong province have been subjected to at least three waves of "pacification," meaning the quelling of insurrection by force. In 1950-1952 the French, supported by Cao Dai and Hoa Hao sect forces, registered a considerable but temporary success in Dinh Tuong. They established a network of defensible observation and warning towers along canals, rivers, and roadways. The Viet Minh were forced back into the Plain of Reeds and interviewees who were associated with the Viet Minh refer to this time as "the period of revolutionary regression." When the alliance with the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao groups broke down, the Viet Minh quickly emerged from the swamps and reasserted their control over essential areas.

In 1962-1963, the threat to the Viet Cong came from the implementation of the Strategic Hamlet program, referred to incorrectly in VC propaganda as the "Staley-Taylor Plan." The insurgent movement's response was two-fold: the construction of defensive fortifications and elaborate systems of traps, spike-pits, and sharpened stakes around villages characterized as "Combat Villages" and the diversion of Local and Main Force units from missions against other political targets to attacks on strategic hamlets. The general reaction to the expansion of GVN/U.S. activities in 1966 and 1967 followed similar lines, suggesting a conservative cast in Viet Cong thinking, or a proper observance of what they consider basic
and unchanging principles of military-political activity in the Delta, or both.

In normal periods of expansion and consolidation, the Viet Cong are content to let their military forces play a relatively passive role. Major departures from this style of operations occurred in 1962-1963, when Strategic Hamlets became the targets of aggressive offensive strikes; toward the end of 1965, when a brief flurry of big unit activity was undertaken, apparently in the hope that military pressure could bring about a decisive breakthrough; and, of course, in the period beginning 30 January 1968, when the Tet offensive took place, probably for the purposes of conveying a message to the populace that they could not find security in the towns and of relieving the pressures stemming from pacification operations. More particularly, however, the threat of the 1966-1967 pacification program prompted the formulation of a number of active counter-measures.

REACTIONS TO GVN PACIFICATION

The first stage of the pacification program, beginning in mid-1966, only involved GVN forces. Two priority areas were selected in the administrative district around the capital city of My Tho, the Chau Thanh or "Capital District." First priority was given to the villages of Thanh Phu and Binh Duc about four miles west of My Tho, for a base was under construction between Binh Duc and My Tho for occupancy by a U.S. Army brigade in January of 1967. Second priority was assigned to the village of Tam Hiep, about five miles northwest of My Tho and
adjoining both the Plain of Reeds and the "Tan Family" line of communications of the Viet Cong.

Changes in what had been for almost two years a standoff in the contest between the Viet Cong and the Government of Vietnam for territorial control began to occur. Concurrently with undertaking construction work on the base for U.S. troops, the intensity of GVN patrolling in the area increased sharply. A picture of villager reactions to fluctuations in the balance of forces in Binh Duc village has been provided by a village cadre, a leading member of the village Women's Association:

[In 1964-1965]... GVN troops rarely went to my hamlet on operations, so the Front cadres were able to organize the people...in the middle of 1966, GVN troops were stationed in the village in very large numbers to pacify it. The village began to be shelled and bombed often...The people were frightened and left... So now the Front in my village is weak. (DT-164)

These villagers had previously viewed the government's failure to contest the control of the Viet Cong until 1966 as evidence that the government forces were not adequate to cope with those of the Viet Cong. In fact, local superiority had for some time rested with the government. Binh Duc is so situated that large Viet Cong units rarely ventured into it. Binh Duc is close to the province capital, is adjacent to an airfield and a Military Training Center, and is bounded by the Mekong River to the south, a major canal to the west, and a heavily patrolled national highway to the north. Its geographical location would have greatly hampered the withdrawal of a large Viet Cong force if caught in the area.
Although Binh Duc did not enjoy the umbrella of security created by the frequent presence of major Viet Cong units, the Viet Cong nevertheless exercised considerable control over the local population and had inspired confidence in the strength of the Front. That the Viet Cong were allowed relative freedom to operate in the village, even while surrounded by vastly superior GVN military forces, corroborated the cadres' portrayal of Front strength.

This situation changed with the decision of the Government to contest the area:

...starting in May or June 1966...[GVN] commandos operated more often...recently, they succeeded in killing one guerrilla and the head of the Economy and Finance Section. From that time on, the VC went into hiding...They were afraid of the commandos, but also all the people had left the hamlet and so they didn't dare to come back. (DT-164)

Insecurity increased for both villagers and cadres and the civilian population began to move away from the scene of the contest.

For the older villagers, the decision to move anticipated returning to the village after temporary refuge in another area. For the young men, the demand for their services by both sides was becoming increasingly difficult to evade. Having arrived at a temporary accommodation with the local Viet Cong cadres, who allowed them to serve as village Guerrillas rather than to be sent off to concentrated units, the young men found it unwise to stay when the GVN arrived in their area.
Most accounts of villager reaction to pacification and their changing evaluations of the balance of force between the Viet Cong and the GVN center around the increasing presence of GVN troops and the failure of the Viet Cong to respond to this by successful armed attack. The criteria by which villagers measure strength are visibility and immediacy. In the event, these practical criteria of judgment worked to the advantage of the pacification forces by damaging the credibility of the Viet Cong's capability, despite their claims, to defend the village. These same criteria had earlier turned the villagers away from the government forces when they failed to respond to the initiatives of the Viet Cong.

Government pacification forces, according to the count of the Tam Hiep village Party Chapter, were some 650 strong. As the Village Party Secretary observed: "Such strength can only be coped with by the Front's Main Force units. The village, or even the District Local Force unit, cannot cope with them."* The need to bring in sizable force to counter pacification efforts presented an immediate dilemma to the Viet Cong, for the terrain in their village was not, as a former deputy village guerrilla unit leader observed, "favorable for stationing (large) troop units."** Even the elements of a province unit stationed in neighboring Long An village and specializing in ambushes, assassinations, and harassment in the vicinity of My Tho had to abandon their operational base and move further north into the Tan Family area.

---

* DT-247, Q. 54  
** DT-216
Priorities and selection of objectives for pacification operations by the GVN would appear to have derived only marginally, if at all, from considerations of local strategy. The siting of the U.S. base adjacent to the airfield between My Tho and Binh Duc had the effect of protecting My Tho town from local assault. Owing to the need to enhance security during the construction of the U.S. base, Binh Duc and Thanh Phu villages received first priority attention. The pacification of the second priority Tam Hiep area had a dual tactical rationale: to protect the northern flank of Thanh Phu/Binh Duc and also to block the direct route from the Plain of Reeds to My Tho.

That the pacification of Tam Hiep had the effect of seriously curtailing Viet Cong access to the "Tan Family" liaison route, during 1967 at least, would appear to have been a fortunate but unanticipated result. The goals of the pacification planners were in this instance overly modest and would appear to have been informed by tactical rather than strategic thinking, even though it was known that the "Tan Family" route was an important one.

The Viet Cong, however, perceived this move as a strategic threat. Prior to the selection of Tam Hiep for pacification in 1967, a member of the Chau Thanh District Committee, and the Party Chapter Secretary of Tam Hiep from 1961 to 1964, gave the following assessment of the role of Tam Hiep and of its western neighbor, Long Dinh:

These two villages are the most important villages in Chau Thanh district. They lie
between the Plain of Reeds stronghold and the GVN controlled areas and, therefore, have always been considered the gateway to My Tho town...

If the GVN succeeds in pacifying these two villages, the consequences will be very important. This will shake every District Committee member's morale because they have always looked on them as vanguard villages, as a back to lean on, and as the last fortress of the Revolution in the District. (DT 135, Q. 304)
VC STRATEGIC VIEW OF THE U.S. ROLE

The arrival of American forces in January of 1967 followed so closely upon the Government's pacification effort of mid-1966 that reactions to the two events are almost inseparable. Clearly, the Viet Cong were aware of the possibility of the introduction of U.S. troops into the delta far in advance of their arrival. The Viet Cong had ample time to prepare ideologically and tactically for this eventuality. Propaganda measures that were taken by the Viet Cong District Committee to prepare the villagers and cadres for the arrival of the Americans included promises that the Front would send large units in to attack and repel the Americans, references to past pacification failures in the area, and exhortations to overcome the difficulties. These served as basic themes to explain to the cadres and to the people why, in the Front's view, the pacification effort would be stymied. In addition, the argument was made that even if temporary setbacks occurred in this one local area, Front victories elsewhere in Vietnam would more than make up for it.

Viet Cong planners are sensitive to the important strategic position of Dinh Tuong and to the centrality of its location. Interestingly, the assumption of the Viet Cong top planners was that US/GVN pacification efforts would be directed primarily at the 20/7 Zone. The disposition of GVN pacification forces did not directly threaten the 20/7 Zone; however, as the Viet Cong correctly foresaw, U.S. forces were soon to concentrate their operations along this axis of villages bordering the Mekong River.

A member of the 514th Bn was indoctrinated along these lines by province military cadres, who added that the zone
bordering on the Mekong was the "lifeline" of Dinh Tuong province, and a "long range strategic geographic position," because of its population and materiel resources, and its suitability for accommodating concentrated mobile units. In addition, the province military cadres offered an intriguing explanation of the underlying rationale of the U.S. strategy in May 1967, after the U.S. operational strategy was put into action:

...The present scheme of the American imperialists is to use a two-prong strategy, and pour in all their strength so that they can pacify the area bordering the Mekong River no matter what the obstacles are.

[They are going to] push the Front infrastructure in this area back into the swamps of the Plain of Reeds and the liberation troops, without a base of support, will have to retreat to this area so that they [the U.S.] can cut them down to the roots. This is the tactic of luring the fish into the basket-trap to catch him.

[The U.S. wants to] gain tight control over the area bordering on the Mekong so that they can cut the My Tho-Kien Hoa inter-province liaison route.... [This will] isolate Kien Hoa, and block the large troop units, the 261st, 263rd, 267th Region Main Force Battalions from operating in Kien Hoa and supporting the movement there, by cutting off the supply of weapons and ammunition from above to this province, so that these units will be gradually paralyzed and annihilated. (DT-248; Q. 2)

This Viet Cong view of U.S. operations reflects a great sensitivity toward the possibility of a wedge being driven between their strong rear base areas in Kien Tuong (the Plain of Reeds) and Kien Hoa provinces.

The picture of civilian cadres and military units being pushed up into the Plain of Reeds is particularly interesting in the light of signs of declining political
organization and support for the military units in some villages, and a progressive reduction in the operational area of these units. The sensitivity shown toward the possibility of having military units pushed back into the Plain of Reeds and bottled up there, and the consequent isolation of Kien Hoa province from the support of these units, indicates that a critical nerve had been touched.

The threat to the Viet Cong strategic geographical position represented one element of the "two pronged attack" of the U.S. troops in the Delta. The second element was the support given to existing GVN military security operations by these troops. The Central Nam Bo* Region Committee issued a resolution, stating that:

...at the present, the biggest scheme of the Americans is to send troops to our country, and pour American troops into the countryside so that they can compete with us for [the control of] the population right in My Tho province. Their intention is to pour American troops along both sides of the Mekong River delta....**

In the Viet Cong's pincers' view of the U.S. plan for the Delta, one pincer was to be a series of attacks on important Viet Cong base areas and liaison routes. The other pincer was seen in the change in the local balance of forces that the addition of U.S. troops to the existing GVN security forces would bring about.

*Central Nam Bo is the Viet Cong designation for six Viet Cong (eight GVN) provinces South and West of Saigon.

**Excerpts from a speech of comrade Bay Phong, Region Committee member, at the Conference of the Political Section of the "My Tho Province Committee," dated January 3, 1967.
A widely disseminated directive from the "Armed Liberation Forces Headquarters" asserted that:

...the Americans will use the majority of puppet troops and some U.S. and satellite troops in the pacification mission, which is to say, destroying homes, property, orchards and ricefields of our people and forcing them into concentration areas so that they can oppress them. They are stepping up the training of what they term "pacification cadres...." They are duping the people and even the puppet troops into thinking that these pacification units are not military or police, but are civilian Revolutionary Development workers....

Incidentally, it is noteworthy that the Viet Cong sought to identify the Revolutionary Development teams as an armed police element, by emphasizing that they were just another GVN armed unit. They also sought to characterize them as "puppets" under U.S. control. A soldier in the 514th Bn said that he had been indoctrinated that, to oppose U.S. aggression, the unit must "hit the tire hard and the inner tube will collapse." He explained that "the tire is the U.S. Army, and the inner tube is the Revolutionary Development program."**

In general, Viet Cong plans to counter the additional threat of the U.S. troop presence in 1967 ran in the direction of increased emphasis on local self reliance and a

*Directive of the Headquarters of the Armed Liberation Forces Concerning Attacking and Annihilating the Pacification Units of the U.S. and their Puppets. No date. (Significantly, the Viet Cong have translated the U.S. term "Revolutionary Development" as "Phat trien Cach Mang" rather than using the actual GVN term in Vietnamese for revolutionary development, "Xay Dung Nong Thon," which means "Rural Construction.")

**DT-224, Q. 39.
return to guerrilla warfare tactics. In 1965, the lower level cadres in the Delta had been told that the direct and decisive confrontation with the U.S. was in the Iron Triangle and Central provinces region, and that the primary mission of the Delta was to supply manpower and materiel resources to these critical areas. The arrival of U.S. troops in the Delta necessitated a change in both tactics and strategy.

THE "AMERICAN-ANNIHILATION PERIMETER" RESPONSE

A notable feature of the new approach was the creation of an "American-Annihilation perimeter" in certain areas, while continuing to put pressure on government towns, roads, and bases. The American-Annihilation perimeter was only an adaptation of the encirclement concept, borrowed from the Chinese, of a rising tide of revolutionary people surrounding and finally engulfing the opponent's shrinking enclaves. Tactically, however, it was a prepared defensive structure intended to impede U.S. military forces in their operations into "liberated" and contested areas. To this end, a major effort was made by the Viet Cong in late 1966 to train local demolition personnel. The trainees included a large percentage of women, and were assigned to various villages, marking a decentralization of the demolition units which had formerly been organized only at province and district level.

The dual purpose of the American-Annihilation perimeter was succinctly stated by an interview subject who was told in an indoctrination course that the goal of setting up these perimeters was to "...create a tight encirclement of the Dong Tam Base of the Americans in Binh Duc and, at the
same time, prevent the ARVN and its allies from raiding or conducting large operations into the surrounding villages." Three American-Anihilation perimeters were set up in concentric circles leading out from the U.S. base.

The first perimeter was made up of those villages in the areas immediately surrounding the Dong Tam base near Binh Duc. The second and third were successive circles of further outlying villages. No two interview subjects agreed as to the exact composition of all three perimeters. The first American-Anihilation perimeter was considered the most crucial, since its villages bordered on the Dong Tam base. A village cadre had read an indoctrination document which revealed that:

The first perimeter...will have to step up guerrilla warfare strongly. Region level cadres will be sent down to take charge of this perimeter and lead the movement. [Underlining added.] (DT-207; Q. 2.)

The missions of the Second and Third Perimeters were similar, but they remained under the control of district cadres.

In the First Perimeter, the existing political organization had been pushed out of most of the villages. The loss of the local political structure, and the increase in the importance of these villages, necessitated the importation of province and region cadres into the area, primarily military specialists. By April 1967, a further evolution of the inter-village sector had occurred in the Second and Third Perimeters, and a "Counter-Pacification Committee" was established for each perimeter with the

*DT-239; Q. 41.
purpose of:

...consolidating the weakened guerrilla forces. This Front Committee joined three villages so that the guerrillas could support each other in combat. The mission of this Front [Counter Pacification] inter-village committee was to provide more energetic support for the battlefield, because an isolated village could not muster enough forces to attack roads and build roadblocks. Also, the intention was to bolster the morale of the guerrillas, the cadres and the people. (DT-207; Q. 8)

The American-Annihilation perimeter was an essentially military response to a challenge which was more than military. The emphasis on guerrilla warfare tactics, the defensive efforts in setting up impenetrable mazes of spike pits and grenade traps in the villages, the organization of small demolition teams, and an influx of military cadres into the threatened area were evidence of various military tactical measures designed to counter US/GVN pacification efforts.

VC PROBLEMS IN FACING U.S. FORCES

Counter-measures against the U.S. troops in Dinh Tuong Province were being discussed as early as mid-1966, and indoctrination had been prepared on the threat to the Viet Cong local and regional position in the same year. An early full theoretical assessment of the arrival of the U.S. troops in the Delta was contained in the official newspaper of the People's Army of North Vietnam in January 1967 -- the month the U.S. troops arrived in Dinh Tuong:

...the incoming force will be dispersed as were other U.S. troops in other theaters of war, thereby weakening itself and providing favorable conditions for the three categories of troops of the Liberation Armed Forces to annihilate its [U.S.] forces.
...The United States once admitted that the "search and destroy" operations will be unsuccessful if pacification fails. Yet, by throwing the puppet army, a very weak force, into the "pacification" task, to fight against our own people's strongpoint which is guerrilla warfare, the U.S. failure is certain. It is clear that failure on both fronts at the same time is inescapable.

In this view, the two elements of basic weakness in the U.S. capabilities in the Delta were (1) the inevitable dispersion of forces coming into the Delta, so that they could be attacked by all three types of forces -- Guerrilla, Local, and Main Force -- and (2) the inextricable connection between the "search and destroy" and the "pacification" tasks. If one failed, the other would also be doomed to failure. If U.S. troops were successful in searching out and destroying the larger Viet Cong units, but did not succeed in "pacification," their successes in the more conventional type of military operation would be undermined.

The implication of this assessment for Viet Cong military strategy was that their military units, even Main Force units, should not directly challenge the U.S. troops, but should strike in relatively undefended areas, and force the opposing troops to spread themselves thin. The 261st Bn, the most prominent Main Force unit of the Upper Delta, was given these instructions for countering U.S. troops in neighboring Long An province:

We had our plans of attacks but not in Long An itself. We would attack the district towns and force the enemy to spread its forces which otherwise would be used to pacify the province alone. When the enemy was forced to spread its forces thin, we would move in to destroy them....Even though the GVN was going to pacify Long An province, the Front was not going
to mass its forces in Long An to fight back. If the Front forces did that it would become a war with a definite front line and not a guerrilla war. But the Front would do all it could to keep its own areas in Long An province. To do so, the Region Military Affairs Section would send its forces down to... strengthen the Long An province unit. (DT-149; Q. 155)

The outcome of the war in the Delta was seen as turning not on direct confrontation with the U.S. troops, but on how successful the Viet Cong could be at forcing the US/GVN security forces to disperse their efforts and lose the offensive initiative. This strategy complemented the attempt to move the locus of hostilities in toward the GVN controlled areas, and fortified the rationale for the acceleration of attacks on urban areas that occurred in 1967, culminating in the Tet offensive beginning at the end of January 1968.

Since the military strategy of the Viet Cong in My Tho province was one of creating psychological pressures on areas of GVN control, and inhibiting GVN operations from entering Viet Cong areas of control, the success of US/GVN military operations cannot be usefully gauged in terms of casualties inflicted on the Viet Cong during large scale actions nor in terms of U.S. capabilities to launch offensive actions against opposing regular force units. With regard to the threat of U.S. troop units, the Viet Cong counterstrategy was one of avoidance of major confrontations unless extreme necessity prompted such an action. It was felt by the Viet Cong that the U.S. strategy was to reduce their area of operations, thus threatening supply and liaison routes and the local political and logistical support structure in the 20/7 Zone.

Despite the acknowledged superiority of the U.S. troops
in mobility and firepower, Viet Cong indoctrination and propaganda lessons repeatedly attributed vulnerabilities to the U.S. troops operating in Vietnam that would offset that advantage. Most prominently mentioned were: inability to adapt to the climate; low morale of the "Little Lord Fauntleroy"; excessive size of the average U.S. soldier, which make them good targets as well as cumbersome operators in rice paddies; difficulties of supply so far from their home bases in the United States; and more theoretically oriented arguments about the political elements of lack of international support and the like.

After observing the initial phase of U.S. operations, the 514th Bn cadres were given the following indoctrination concerning the combat tactics of the U.S. troops:

Recently [summer 1967] the battalion was given indoctrination on how to cope with two tactics of the U.S. 9th Division -- the "butterfly tactic" [buom buom] and the "chup non" tactics. The "butterfly" tactic is one in which a small action can turn into a large one. It starts off with a heliborne landing of a small unit to probe the area. If there is an encounter, a second helicopter with more troops comes in [and the operation] may rise to battalion or regiment size for an encirclement....

The "chup non" tactic means a fast troop landing of a small unit -- maybe a platoon -- which will hit fast and retreat quickly. There is no set pattern of time or space involved, so that the element of surprise may be gained at any place. This tactic is often used to hit installations or capture cadres, and is very effective. (DT-242; Q. 17)

A Chau Thanh District Local Force Platoon Leader confirmed that:

"Chup non" is a movement of using a hat as a net and snagging the prey with it.
At present, the U.S. and ARVN troops conduct surprise operations. They don't follow any fixed pattern. Therefore, it is very hard to fight them. It isn't easy to fight the Regional Force and Popular Force soldiers either. The main reason is that the NLF units have to be dispersed into small groups to escape the U.S. and ARVN operations. (DT-209; Q. 10)

The avoidance of set operational patterns, and the mobility of U.S. operations, injected an element of surprise and uncertainty into the military aspect of Viet Cong operations. U.S. units, using the tactics described above, could penetrate into Viet Cong areas without warning, and without allowing VC units the lead time for preparation to defend or withdraw allowed by the more cumbersome advance of division size operations, and the advance warning of GVN operations often given to Viet Cong. Because of this threat of surprise operations in previously secure areas, the Viet Cong had to pay particular attention to the selection of operational areas for their troops. The Chau Thanh District Local Force Company was reproached for lack of aggressiveness, though, during a meeting with the district cadres:

Some people brought out the following facts: "We met with very strong enemy units that were ten times stronger than we were. Therefore, we dared not resist their operations. If we stood against them, we would have been completely eliminated. The enemy ... has mechanized equipment and modern weapons. In addition, our areas of control have been encroached on and reduced in size." (DT-209; Q. 8)

REACTION TACTICS AND TERMINOLOGY

From the viewpoint of the Viet Cong, the form of warfare appropriate to the Delta is guerrilla warfare,
which places equal emphasis on military and political considerations. Whereas warfare in the wooded open areas of Central Vietnam requires predominantly Main Force military action, the Delta requires an unbroken continuum of response from hamlet militia to Main Force, and from the lowest level of political organization to the Region Committee's overall direction of guerrilla warfare. A region cadre told the "My Tho Province Committee" to "resolutely step up the people's guerrilla warfare movement. This is the objective of the Party in countering the enemy's pacification."*

In 1966, orders were given to all civilian cadres to start carrying arms, and be prepared to fight in addition to their routine mission.

Before, the civilian cadres only took care of civilian duties -- there was a distinct line between the military and civilian branches. The...directive for the "remoulding" of the cadres said that starting from now [mid 1966], in order to cope with the dry season campaign of the CVN, all Party members, Labor Youth members and people would have to carry weapons and fight. (DT-177; Q. 170)

The policy of maximum mobilization, started in 1965, remained in effect, but the manpower was now directed toward "total political mobilization." Total political mobilization was not restricted to the cadres, but was also aimed at enlisting the participation of the local population in opposing pacification efforts.

A village Guerrilla pointed out this general trend, and said that:

*Excerpts from a speech of Comrade Bay Phong of the Region Committee, op. cit.
Every villager has the mission of countering the enemy in every way, for example, planting spikes along the rows of fruit trees, along the banks of fishponds, and planting grenades in the chicken houses. There is a plan to "create heavy foliage," and it is forbidden to weed orchards and cut down trees, so that there will be a heavy underbrush cover for the Front forces to set up ambushes or hide in. (DT-216; Q. 8)

This program, called by the Viet Cong "alteration of terrain features," is a prescription for creating a physical environment favorable to guerrilla operations.

Along with the return to guerrilla warfare came the employment of terminology that was current during the 1959-61 period of the "Concerted Uprising" campaign. The most significant term used in this connection was the "Destruction of the Oppression" (of GVN officials), which was used as a slogan to guide the early attempts at assassinating and terrorizing GVN officials. In 1967, indoctrination courses and documents alike used the expression, "The Second Destruction of the Oppression," which suggests a throwback to the earlier guerrilla warfare stage of the insurgency.

The possibility that this might have been interpreted as a retrogressive move was not overlooked by the Viet Cong. One line of explanation used in low level indoctrination courses was:

In 1967 we have a great chance to shorten the war. At present, the Front has not yet thrown in all its forces to oppose the Americans and is only using guerrilla warfare to tie down and wear away the strength of the opposition. The Front has right now many divisions and battalions that haven't yet been thrown into the fray against the ARVN -- such as the Tay Do Battalion, etc., which are still in training, In 1967, the Americans will not be able to send in
any more troops and they will become bogged down and weaken, and will look for a way to retreat back to their own country. (DT-240; Q. 28)

The revival of terminology of the early insurgency and the indirect admission that a strategy of direct confrontation was not appropriate to the military situation of 1967 suggests some slippage in the Viet Cong position in that year and makes the Tet offensive all the more remarkable. It lends some credence to the theory that slipping population control was a factor influencing the decision to conduct the Tet offensive. The 1967 emphasis on operations in weak areas and on the "Destruction of the Oppression" indicates that undermining GVN control over population was a critical element of Viet Cong strategy for 1967. If the Viet Cong cadres drew the inference of reversion to an earlier revolutionary stage, it was not reflected in the interviews.

MAINTAINING CONTROL IN "LIBERATED AREAS"

The problem faced by the Viet Cong in 1967 contained many of the same elements as the challenge of 1962-63. A large scale GVN effort to regain control over part of the population in the province was accompanied by a new factor in the military situation. In 1962, the threat was Strategic Hamlets and heliborne operations; in 1967 it was New Life Hamlets and the addition of U.S. troops in the Delta. If the elements of the challenge to the Viet Cong in these two periods were similar, the response of the Viet Cong in 1967 bore a noticeable resemblance to their reaction in 1962-63. The American-Annihilation Perimeters, with the heavy emphasis on the construction of fortified
Combat Villages, were essentially a return to the construction of Combat Villages in 1962 to counter the "Staley-Taylor Plan."

Faced with possible loss of control over a portion of the civilian population and of having their cadres "stranded," the Viet Cong apparently concluded that the best defense is a vigorous offensive. Their planning called for action to:

...hit hard into the major pacification areas like Binh Duc and Thanh Phu, bring in the guerrillas to snipe at the cadres...and destroy the roads. The Local Force will annihilate the Revolutionary Development teams. The demolition teams will come in to destroy the bulldozers, the dredges, and other equipment. The Local Force will hit the American military convoys and attack and destroy the New Life Hamlets in order to support the propaganda line that New Life Hamlets are the place where the people get caught in a hail of crossfire between the opposing sides. (DT-190; Q. 64)

Requirements for an offensive defense of Viet Cong territory and control over the population were elaborated in a directive concerning operations in "weak areas":

Pushing hard into weak areas means an aggressive defense, and a consolidation of our rear bases, and the defeat of the enemy plan to put their rear areas in order....If the enemy consolidates the weak areas and brings his rear under full control, it will make the job of maintaining full control over the people in our liberated areas extremely difficult.*

These statements of the Viet Cong strategy also indicated a concern for the maintenance of control in the "liberated areas." The impact of a consolidation of the GVN position

*"Push Forward the Movement in Weak Rural Areas," no date.
in the "weak" areas was viewed as having a direct and adverse consequence on the Viet Cong's position in their liberated areas.

By the same token, success in preventing the GVN from consolidating their control in "weak" areas and in pacification would directly contribute toward maintaining the Viet Cong position in VC areas. In the Viet Cong view, military operations created an intolerable situation for the civilian population in the areas under their control:

...The people have heard from neighboring villages that wherever the Revolutionary Development cadres go they poke around and search houses to arrest people who have supported the Front. In addition, the cadres feel that when the GVN moves into an area to pacify it, that area will first be intensively bombed and shelled, and then there will be recurrent operations and, finally, a lot of posts will be put up. So they are very afraid of pacification, and they zealously participate in all tasks directed at countering pacification. (DT-234; Q. 53)

Living on a battlefield, the civilian population found, was too dangerous, and many of them left their homes in Viet Cong areas and came into government-controlled areas where there was no bombing and shelling.

The Tam Hiep Village Party Secretary, who rallied in September of 1967, mentioned in his interview that he was able to stay in Tam Hiep only because of a well constructed underground hideout:

It was thanks to this cache that I was able to stay in Thanh Long hamlet from January 1967 to the date of my rally. As a matter of fact, I was ordered by the District to stay in Long Dinh village, Kinh Nang hamlet. I didn't carry out this order because Kinh Nang was bombed and shelled very often...Although
Thanh Long was visited by GVN soldiers much more often, it was bombed and shelled less often. (DT-247; Q. 14)

This furtive existence, however, made it difficult for the Party Secretary to exercise his leadership. He was unable to hold plenary sessions of the Village Party Chapter because, "...it was risky to do so. Moreover, communication with other Village Party Chapter Committee members was also difficult since there was a lot of movements of the 7th (ARVN) Division soldiers camping in my village."

The meetings that were held had to be held outside of Tam Hiep in Long Dinh village, then under Viet Cong control.

With increasing difficulties in communication between the village cadres, and with the increased frequency of GVN operations in the village and the consequent hazards to cadre movements, control over the village population began to slip. The Village Secretary explained in considerable detail the consequences of this slippage.

The expansion of the Front is one of the most pressing requirements at all times. When we speak of expansion, we mean increasing the members of the Popular Associations as well as the strength of the guerrilla unit. At present, it is dead certain that nobody can rebuild the Popular Associations in Tam Hiep. The reason is simple: the Tam Hiep villagers' confidence (in the Front) has been considerably shaken, and they want to cut all ties with the Front. Most of them still pay taxes, but it is simply to have the Front leave them alone. In the reports I read, the Executive Committee of the Farmers' Association mentioned time and time again that despite their repeated efforts to invite the people to attend regular sessions, no one agreed to come.

This situation made us feel more and more isolated

*DT-247; Q. 28.
from the people. We can't help feeling this because all of us have been intensively indoctrinated that the Party is 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? (DT-247; Q. 28)

Hamlet meetings of the popular associations, which had been held about once every month and a half in 1966 were no longer conducted. By 1967, contacts between the village and hamlet cadres and the local population took the form of small neighborhood meetings.

This erosion of the communications process, which was by no means restricted to Tam Hiep village, would seem a major contributing factor to the decline of the popular associations in the hamlets. Meetings of an association's membership help to confirm its organizational identity. When the contacts with the organization are reduced to ad hoc meetings of small groups of individuals with the organization's leadership, it is the cadres themselves, and not the organization, who continue to function. The collective identity of the association and its organizational structure begins to fade, and is replaced by a small group of individuals.

A related important consequence is that the inability to rely on a collective organization format to give orders and conduct indoctrination forces the leadership of this organization to multiply their efforts. Instead of
accomplishing their business in one large meeting, it takes a number of small meetings to accomplish the mission, and the village cadres are increasingly forced to step into the breach to help the overburdened hamlet cadres.

The village secretary also described the loss of even the Party's covert "underground" activist sympathizers.

The "underground" cadres had been selected from among the good elements of the village, and they were secretly trained.... They waged whispering propaganda, and their influence was great as long as their role was kept secret.... Without these activist sympathizers, the Front would never be able to get the people to adopt its policies, and it will be forced to get what it wants by orders or coercion. In this case, the Front's activities would lose the pretense of being based on the people's wishes. Before the GVN pacification took place, there were nine activists in Tam Hiep. All of them have now quit working for the Front. (DT-247; Q. 8, 9)

To prevent to the extent possible this threatening possible sequence of events stemming from loss of territorial control, the Viet Cong have gone to great pains to avoid provoking responses that result in damage to "liberated" areas.

If heightened insecurity in the "liberated" areas could work to the advantage of the government, the Viet Cong reasoned, moving the battlefield into GVN controlled areas, the "weak" areas, could reverse the outflow of civilian population. To lessen insecurity in their own
areas the Viet Cong sought to avoid provoking battles in strong Viet Cong areas. Meanwhile attempts were made to move the focus of hostilities into GVN areas, which may explain the marked increase in mortar attacks on district towns and the province capital of My Tho in late 1967.

CROSS-PRESSURES ON VILLAGERS

An effect of pacification operations in Dinh Tuong of particular note was the burden of cross-pressures on the Viet Cong controlled population. They were under pressure to respond to two authorities, the GVN and the Viet Cong, arousing deep fears of becoming "illegals." In the words of a guerrilla unit squad leader from Tam Hiep:

... they are scared that if the GVN pacifies up to their hamlets, they will become "illegals." (DT-216, Q. 42)

Caught in the crush between two "governmental authorities," the villagers in Tam Hiep were placed in a dilemma. The thought of being an "illegal" is anathema to most rural Vietnamese. Being "illegal," the term Vietnamese use to describe being out of line with the dictates of the powers that be, is hardly a notion of law. Rather it expresses their calculation of the risk of reprisals or punishment they may incur as the result of finding themselves accidentally or deliberately at odds with those in power.

Following the dictates of the prevailing governmental authority, translated literally from the Vietnamese language as "primary power," has long been the best path
to survival for the Delta peasant, whether the primary power is the GVN or the Viet Cong. Accommodation with the primary power is a necessity. If the area is controlled by the Viet Cong, the peasant must avoid being termed a "spy," and "undesirable element," or a "complicated element," one whose background and loyalties are not fully known. If the area is controlled by the GVN, being identified as a "Viet Cong" can encompass any number of situations, from the lowliest member of the Farmers' Association to the Village Party Chapter Secretary. When primary power is well established, and its demands are clear and unambiguous, the peasant has only to adapt himself, and submit to those demands to get along.

When the GVN and Viet Cong compete for control of the people, it is the villagers who are caught in between. The Village Secretary of Tam Hiep described this crisis in the following terms:

At the outset of the pacification, not only were the 7th Division soldiers [ARVN] correct in their behavior, but they didn't arrest anyone during their operations. This made the villagers feel relaxed and confident. Rumors about this spread all around and many of the villagers came back to Tam Hiep to settle. However, this didn't last long. For the last two or three months, GVN authorities have begun to arrest the people and their confidence has been shattered. Those who were arrested were the Front's activist sympathizers who had quit working for the Front. These arrests have shaken the people anew, because almost none of them, from the GVN viewpoint, could be termed not guilty. As you well know, everyone living in the Front controlled areas had to participate in road destruction or had to join the Popular Associations. Consequently, every one of them could be labeled VC supporters and could be arrested .... The direct consequence of these arrests was that many youths have left the pacified hamlets. In 1960
and 1961, the youths, out of fear of the GVN, fled into liberated zones, but at present, all of them have fled to the [GNV controlled] cities. (DT-247; Q. 47)

Thus, pacification must take account of the rather passive role of the general population. The phrase, "rooting out the infrastructure," could imply that all those who have given aid and comfort to the enemy would be punished for this support. But villagers living under Viet Cong domination have little choice. They must conform to the demands of the "primary power."

When the GVN becomes the "primary power," the villagers may have to clear themselves through the Chieu Hoi program or face arrest. In either case, they are forced out of the village. The most serious problem is that of the young men who, having lived under VC domination, are automatically and correctly assumed to have performed some service for the Viet Cong, be it as simple as digging up the road. These young men, the source of manpower for mobilizing a village militia and engaging in Revolutionary Development tasks, have fled to the urban areas. The strength of the local village community is thus sapped by the outflow of young men, and the Revolutionary Development forces end up "pacifying" a community of women and old men.

A cadre of the Chau Thanh District Committee, and a former Party Chapter Secretary, had analyzed this problem even before Tam Hiep became a priority pacification area, and when most of it was still under VC control.

In Front controlled areas at present, there is a widespread belief that once one is arrested by the GVN, one would no longer enjoy the Front's confidence and therefore one would be in a position to quit the
Front without being punished. So far, many cadres have been arrested by the GVN and been released. When they came back to their hamlets, they decided to quit working and they were allowed to do so. This makes me think that the GVN could arrest every member of the popular associations of a village when it decides to pacify it. A brief indoctrination should be given to them immediately thereafter. When this is over, the GVN could release them. When they recover their freedom, they will become "legal" citizens and they will quit working for the Front. On the contrary, if the GVN imprisoned them for a long time or tortured them, they will become resentful of it again. After this release they will fight for the Front again. (DT-135; Q. 458)

While this is a somewhat extreme solution, it does point up the necessity of finding some way of making the villagers "legal" with respect to the GVN authorities while not, at the same time, exposing them to retaliation by the Viet Cong.

The widespread apprehension of the Tam Hiep villagers suggests that "doing away with vengefulness and building a new spirit"* will be difficult until a clear line is drawn between guilt and innocence. If this line cuts too deeply into the civilian population, however, the prospects for a successful pacification program are bleak. To arrive at the most effective line of demarcation between the Viet Cong cadres and the "people," an understanding of the control mechanism of the Viet Cong is essential -- not only for purposes of correctly assessing the value of individual "infrastructure" members so that a clearer line can be drawn between the essential cadres and the people, but also to locate the most critical links in the Viet

---

*Article III of the 11-point Revolutionary Development criteria.
Cong chain of command, so that pacification efforts may be directed at the most lucrative targets.

DECENTRALIZATION OF ORGANIZATION

Connected with the development of American-Aannihilation perimeters and with other measures to muster force against pacification were changes in the organizational structure of the Viet Cong system. During 1960-1963 the Viet Cong had begun to recognize that their province-district-village administrative breakdown in Dinh Tuong was not always responsive to local problems, particularly at the district level. Districts were large, in certain areas terrain did not favor the constant flow of communications necessary for the maintenance of the system, and the National Highway and other essential government-held roads cut through districts and even villages to make liaison difficult across what in effect became local boundaries. The solution was obvious: to subdivide the district into Inter-village Sectors and to place a cadre in charge of each sector (see Fig. 4).

![Diagram](image)  
**Fig. 4—1963 reorganization of district-village relations**
After some experimentation with putting two or three villages under the leadership of a district cadre in 1960-63, orders were issued in 1963 to split the Chau Thanh or capital district into four sectors, each led by a member of the Current Affairs Section of the District Committee.* Since the Viet Cong found it increasingly difficult to convene the entire District Committee and even to bring together the smaller executive body of the Current Affairs Section, these senior district cadres were given general responsibility to represent the District Committee for their assigned areas. Division into inter-village sectors followed a logical pattern dictated by government-controlled roads and their adjacent belts of security.

In addition to this inter-village sector organization, cadres from specialized branches of the District Committee were also assigned areas of responsibility covering several villages.

Assignments of cadres to areas followed no clear pattern. The territory of an inter-village finance and economy cadre, for example, might overlap with that of an inter-village propaganda cadre. But our data do not make fully clear either the organizational purposes of these sub-assignments or the reasons for assigning any particular group of villages to any one cadre. As to the latter, it appears that a cadre's area responsibilities usually included his native village. As to the organizational purpose, it would appear to be another example of alternative organizational networks set up in advance of contingencies. In at least two interviews, the inter-village grouping was

*DT-233.
characterized as a reserve decision-making echelon in the event of a breakdown in communications between district and village.*

While the development of inter-village sectors under members of the District Current Affairs Section and the assignment of small clusters of villages to ordinary members of the District Committee were expressions of organizational growth before 1964, they also showed a trend toward administrative decentralization at the district level. This was a significant departure from the basic organizational principle of the Viet Cong, "the collectivity makes the decisions, and the individuals are held responsible for them." The District Committee remained the body for collective decision-making. Although inter-village sector leaders were apparently authorized to deal independently with pressing local problems, they were not regarded as acting collectively.

To illustrate what was happening in 1963, the experience of the Viet Cong's Chau Thanh district is informative. Ba Vu, the Deputy Secretary of the Chau Thanh District Committee, was assigned to lead a 14-village sector that included Tam Hiep, Phu My, and the "Tan Family" area. Thanh Viet, the head of the District Military Affairs Section, was placed in charge of a second sector, including the villages in the Binh Duc/Thanh Phu complex. A third sector, composed of the villages around Vinh Kim, was turned over to Quoc Hong, the third-ranking member of the Chau Thanh District Committee.

In 1966-1967, in the face of pacification operations in Dinh Tuong, more far-reaching organizational changes occurred. The number of functions assumed by individual cadres, particularly at the district level, sharply increased, and some district cadres were responsible for three or four jobs simultaneously. Cadres in charge of sectors had less time to

*DT-239, Q. 75 and DT-148, Q. 124.
travel back and forth to plenary meetings of the District Committee and the pressure of events often demanded that problems be solved before being aired before the full committee. In addition, decreasing security in many areas made travel hazardous, which gave further impetus to the decentralization of decision-making.

Fig. 5—1966 reorganization of district-village relations

Figure 5 shows the 1966 reorganization of district-village relations with the insertion of yet another level of command and control into the local organization, the "Inter-village Clusters." Where the "Inter-village Sectors" were directed by leading members of the District Committee, the "Inter-village Clusters" were each led by an ordinary member of the District Committee, although in some cases the inter-village sector chief doubled up and led an
inter-village cluster in addition to his sector responsibilities. Significantly, the sector chief had increased powers and a command, rather than a coordinating function. Upon the cluster chiefs devolved the coordinating and monitoring functions formerly exercised at the sector level.

The 1966 reorganization placed even more authority and responsibility in the hands of fewer cadres. Functions performed by the district cadres of specialized branches began to taper off and were assumed by the cadres in charge of the large inter-village sectors and by the cadres in charge of the smaller components, the inter-village clusters. The pattern of sub-assignments of specialized cadres fitted in with the coordinating role of the sectors in the 1963 system, but not with the centralized command function of the 1966 reorganization. Deployment of specialized cadres in 1963 was clearly based first on an adequate supply of cadres; secondly, on the apportionment of tasks in line with a cadre's background, capabilities, and the convenience of the District Committee and the specialized section to which he was assigned; and thirdly, on the flexibility of the loose coordination role of the inter-village sector chief.

By 1967, although the cadre structure in Dinh Tuong had remained intact down to the district level, a high rate of turnover at the village level and the increasing burdens that the decline of the hamlet popular associations placed on the cadres was felt throughout the entire Viet Cong organization. Data collected from many interviews suggest that a major series of Party personnel changes took place not only in Dinh Tuong province, but also
elsewhere in the Delta. A Viet Cong document, purporting to be from COSVN headquarters, outlined a decision of the Party Central Committee as follows:

1. The Current Affairs Section of COSVN should select (cadres) to send down to the Current Affairs Section of the Region.

2. The Current Affairs Section of the Region should send (cadres) down to the Current Affairs Section of the Province Committees.

3. The Current Affairs Section of the Province Committee should send (cadres) down to the District Committees.

4. The Current Affairs Section of the District Committee must choose a number of capable District Committee members and send them down to the Village Party Chapters to lead the movement directly.

If in a district, there are Party Chapters that have disintegrated or are weak, the District Committee should immediately send a District Committee member to these villages to become the Secretary or the Deputy Secretary.*

In the Viet Cong's My Tho (Dinh Tuong and Go Cong) province organization, Ba Chiem, Secretary of the Chau Thanh District Committee during part of the "six years of peace" from 1954 to 1960 and who had risen to regional level, returned to the province and replaced Chin Du, an extremely competent cadre, as Secretary of the VC's My Tho

*Directive: COSVN Resolution on the Reconsolidation of Leadership from Region to Province, District and Village, dated December 4, 1966, signed by Anh Ut for the Party Central Committee, and extracted from the minutes of the Region II Conference of December 2, 1966. (The authenticity of this document cannot be verified. Nonetheless, it does correspond to the actual developments in Party leadership assignments.)
Province Party Committee. A successor to Ba Chiem in the role of Chau Thanh District Party Secretary during the early phases of the insurgency, Ba Thanh, returned from an important staff section job in the Province Party Committee to resume his former function. Vua Tau, the incumbent District Secretary was, in effect, demoted to the function of Deputy Secretary, thus displacing Ba Vu from that position. Ba Vu in turn became the Village Party Chapter Secretary of his native village of Tan Hoa Thanh, in the heart of the "Tan Family" area.

The trend of granting increased powers to individual members of the District Committee intensified. Initially, this decentralization of authority to inter-village sectors was a move toward bureaucratic rationalization. The necessity of dispersing the various administrative organs of the District Committee for security reasons made it difficult to ensure the smooth functioning of the district administrative machine throughout the entire district. Apparently, the best alternative was the organization of inter-village sectors, and the assignment of a high ranking member of the District Committee to ensure that the needs of each area were ministered to, and to serve as a general co-ordinator of all district-village relationships in his area.

In the summer and fall of 1966, increasing GVN military pressure put an additional strain on liaison and communications not only between the inter-village sectors, but within them as well. A letter from Thanh Viet to the head of the Chau Thanh district liaison unit, dated July 25, 1966, read:
Our liaison routes have been endangered lately because of enemy pacification. A number of comrades from the liaison team and from the other sections have been arrested and this caused many difficulties to you and your comrades, and also to the Revolution in general.

You said that the outer liaison route would be cut off by the enemy, but this does not definitely mean that it will be. If your comrades handle the liaison with more skill and secrecy than before, I'm sure that its security will be maintained. With regard to the general situation, you should indoctrinate the other comrades in the unit to bolster their morale and prevent them from getting demoralized.

The District Current Affairs Section and the Military Affairs Section have approved your request to open a new liaison route further in, but meanwhile, continue to use the old one.*

These difficulties were not unique to Chau Thanh district. A province conference of the rear services Postal-Liaison-Transportation branch observed that, "From the beginning of this year to present [June 1966] the enemy has stepped up his scheme of operating and putting pressure on our [liaison] corridors in the province, on the ground and on the water....They have caused us a great deal of trouble."**

Two liaison stations in Tam Hiep village were put out of operation by the intensified GVN operations in the area.

---

*Letter from Thanh Viet, "For the Current Affairs and the Military Affairs Section," to comrades Nam Vi and Ba Chep, dated July 25, 1966.

**"Minutes of the Plenary Conference of the C.348 Postal-Liaison-Communications Branch...," dated 8 June 1966, p. 1.
A station in Nhan Hue hamlet which guided both cadres and military units from Long Dinh village into the Thanh Phu area was closed down and, according to a former deputy guerrilla unit leader of this village, was not used after the beginning of 1967. Another liaison station, located in Long Dien hamlet, serviced a group of three villages, including Tam Hiep. The village Secretary of Tam Hiep said that:

The youth who ran it was captured by the GVN four or five months ago [April or May, 1967]. From then on, the liaison station has been closed down. I don't know what happened to the communications between Long An and Dao Thanh villages and the District Committee. I presume that the Front has set up another liaison route. (DT-247; Q. 50)

Tam Hiep village found a solution in recruiting another liaison agent, and maintained contact with the district. Nevertheless, these developments were symptomatic of a generally difficult communications problem throughout the province, as a result of heightened military pressure.

Because of these problems, increasing authority was given to the district inter-village cadres, and the number of these cadres increased as the situation in the inter-village sectors became more critical. By the end of 1966, Ba Vu, the displaced Deputy Secretary of the Chau Thanh District Party Committee who had been in charge of an eleven-village sector since 1963, was now saddled with the additional responsibilities of running a village in addition to his other duties. The village guerrilla unit leader of Phu My revealed that:

Phu My village has a plan of operations linked with two neighboring villages, Tan Hoa Thanh and Hung Thanh My....The mission of the three villages in the
links-of-chain operational plan is to provide a joint
sentry and warning system. ... The coordination of
operations is only done when Ba Vu assumes command.
(DT-179; Q. 35)

Although no formal directive for reorganization of
the district-village command structure was issued, and
no interview subject specifically stated that there had
been any major changes in the role of the inter-village
sectors since 1963, a significant reorientation in the
role of the inter-village sector had occurred. To illus-
trate from an interviewee's statement about the inter-
village guerrilla structure that had appeared in 1965
under inter-village sector leadership:

The resolution concerning building up the inter-
village guerrilla forces was released in February
1965. At present [early 1966] there are only two of
them in the whole district. The first inter-village
guerrilla force includes the guerrilla units of Tam
Hiep, Than Cuu Nghia, Tan Ly Dong, Tan Ly Tay, Tan
Hoa Thanh, My Phuoc, Long Dinh, Phu My and Hung Thanh
My villages. The second includes those of Diem My,
Binh Trung, HUU Dao, Kim Son, Vinh Kim, Ban Long,
Phu Phong and Song Thuan. There aren't any inter-
village guerrilla forces in the remaining villages,
such as Dao Thanh, Thanh Phu, Binh Duc, etc. Instead,
these areas are provided with sentinel stations which
will put out the grapevine alarm when necessary.
Only Nhi Binh stands apart from this large organiza-
tion. The reason is that it is a big and heavily
populated village, separated from the others by the
Kinh Xang canal. Nevertheless, a grapevine alarm
system also connects it with Long Dinh and, in
emergencies, it will have support from Tam Hiep too.
(DT-135; Q. 280)

The large inter-village guerrilla aggregation of 1965
and early 1966 had apparently been broken down into smaller
units, and its mission seemed to have changed somewhat,
from a force capable of countering small GVN operations
(the original purpose of the inter-village guerrilla units) to sentinel duty. It should be noted that in 1965 the only villages that deviated from the inter-village unit standard organization were a strong one -- Nhi Binh -- and three villages that bordered on strong GVN areas close to the province capital. It is possible that the breakup of the larger inter-village units was due to a necessity for closer coordination and faster reaction to attack, rather than the offensive possibilities that a larger, but more cumbersome, aggregation would offer. If true, this switch to sentinel duty would indicate a growing encroachment of the GVN threat into Viet Cong territory, and a greater necessity for smaller defensively oriented groupings with rapid communications.*

Coordination between village and district seems to have become progressively more erratic in late 1966 and 1967, and the power of decision making in all matters increasingly concentrated in the hands of a small number of district cadres. When Ba Vu took charge of his inter-village sector, Thanh Viet, the head of the District Military Affairs Section ceased coming to the area. Several District Local Force unit cadres, some of them natives of Tam Hiep, continued to come into that village in 1966, to set up a counter-pacification plan, but did not return in 1967. In the inter-village sector which included Nhi Binh village, according to a village cadre:

*Three permanent sentinel stations manned by the guerrillas in the tri-village area of Ba Vu were all within rifle shot distance of one other station.
Due to the difficult situation from early 1967 to the present time, the District Party Committee has not sent any technical cadres to come to my village to inspect its specialized branches. Only Nam Xieu (the inter-village sector chief) comes in to guide all activities in my village. (DT-207; Q. 99)

A village cadre in My Long village in the heart of the 20/7 Zone observed:

In places where the District Committee [cadres] rarely come, the Party Chapters tend to wait [for them to come] and slack off on their missions. In My Long village, in 1966 the District Committee [cadres] came down quite often, but in 1967 they came less often due to the difficult situation; there was much more bombing and shelling, and more unexpected operations than before. The Party Chapter didn't meet as often and couldn't carry out its missions to the desired extent -- the finance collection was the only job that was fully carried out.

In principle, the District Committee members come to the weak villages more often to help out and lead the carrying out of missions. The strong and average villages were normally given more latitude by the District Committee and carried out jobs more on their own and with less guidance from the District Committee than the weak villages. (DT-204; Q. 51)

Liaison and security difficulties seemed to be dictating a trend toward decentralizing the decision making authority from the District Committee, with its specialized staff sections, to the inter-village sector led by a District Party Committee member.

In Tam Hiep and surrounding villages, it appeared that Ba Vu contacted the village secretaries only for important annual indoctrination events. The routine overall supervisory effort in these villages had been left to a subordinate of Ba Vu, also a District Party Committee member. The Village Secretary of Tam Hiep described the
evolution of the decentralization process:

Before the CVN conducted the pacification program in Tam Hiep, and even during the first few months of this program, the District used to hold... Expanded Plenary Sessions* to disseminate the upcoming missions. But during the last few months [prior to September 1967] neither Hai De [the guerrilla unit leader] nor I were able to attend these sessions. I once asked Bay Thuan about this, and he replied that because of the general situation in the district, the District Committee had stopped holding these sessions. From then on, it has been Bay Thuan who had to indoctrinate us on the upcoming missions. (DT-247; Q. 27)

Bay Thuan, the district cadre subordinate of Ba Vu, had become, in effect, the head of a separate inter-village sector composed of several villages surrounding Tam Hiep, indicating a fragmentation of the former large eleven village inter-sector.

Because of the security problems in Tam Hiep village, Bay Thuan's visits apparently became less and less frequent. When he came, he could not convene the entire Village Party Chapter, and met with only a few cadres during each visit. The Village Party Chapter Secretary, in turn, had to pass along information on the forthcoming missions to small groups of village cadres. This increased burden on the time and energies of the village cadres was compounded by the reduction of assistance from the district specialized staff sections, and the deterioration of the hamlet popular associations, which had previously been entrusted with the

*"Expanded" here means that in addition to the plenary of the District Committee, the leading village Party cadres are included.
actual mobilization of villagers.

The decentralization of decision making authority inherent in the increased emphasis on the inter-village sectors was a trend which may have had the short range consequence of giving greater flexibility and initiative to the cadres on the spot and may have improved one of the great deficiencies of the ponderous Viet Cong organization -- its slow reflexive reactions. The probable long term trends do not seem to augur as well for the Viet Cong. The strength of the Viet Cong has, as noted in a previous chapter, been their organization, and its capacity for training raw human material and putting it to effective use. Like all large organizations, its continued existence relies on its ability to perpetuate itself, irrespective of any individual or group within the system.

In 1966 and 1967 the trend was toward increased reliance on individuals, experienced cadres, who represented a considerable investment in training for the Viet Cong. The reaction to the pressures of pacification was to send these experienced cadres down to lower echelons to take charge. Whether because service with the Viet Cong had ceased to be attractive to capable young men or whether there was simply insufficient lead time to train cadres, the greatest problem facing the Viet Cong in 1967 was to find new blood to infuse the system with new energy. The older cadres had, on the whole, done remarkably well in

*In 1967 some VC emphasis was placed on the recruitment of women, even for such jobs as demolition work. Of the interview subjects, the women, on the whole, appear to be more committed to the Viet Cong than the men.
responding to the major challenge of US/GVN pacification efforts. But attrition was taking place, and the inability of the Viet Cong to replace critical cadres who had been killed, suggests that the middle level infrastructure -- particularly at the point of contact between the village and the district -- was still intact but becoming increasingly brittle.

An interesting parallel to this evolution in the relations between the district and the village was a similar development in North Vietnam. An article published in the August issue of Hoc Tap, the Lao Dong Party theoretical journal, outlined an organizational trend that almost mirrored the situation described above: "Generally speaking, each district is divided into three or four areas, each area embracing between seven and ten villages. Each area is led by a District Committee standing committee member." These appear to correspond to the inter-village sectors organized in "My Tho" province in 1963. A new innovation was the inter-village cluster: "... District Committee members who are responsible for clusters of villages will boldly and quickly solve many concrete problems for villages, ...."*

An example of a comparable development in "My Tho" province was the segmenting of Ba Vu's** eleven-village

---


** Ba Vu now appeared to be serving simultaneously as: 1. The titular Deputy Secretary of the District Committee, 2. head of the Propaganda Indoctrination Section, 3. Inter-village sector chief, 4. Inter-village Chief, and 5. Party Chapter Secretary of Tan Hoa Thanh village.
sector into smaller three village units, one of which led directly by Ba Vu. Another was led by Bay Thuan, an ordinary District Committee member, mentioned in several interview excerpts quoted above. Inherent in this decentralization were problems of major concern to the Party leaders. The Hoc Tap article stated that though it had been found necessary to organize the new inter-village "clusters" in North Vietnam, "...the role of the Standing Committee members -- each of whom is responsible for an area -- is still very important." That the importance of their role required reaffirmation was a possible indication of the actual eclipse of their unique prominence in district-village relations caused, perhaps, by the delegation of increased authority and decision making power to the ordinary District Committee members in charge of "clusters" of villages.

It is likely, however, that what the Area (Sector) cadre loses in authority to his "cluster" chief subordinates, he gains in increased flexibility and authority in his own jurisdiction. The concentration of decision making authority at both "Area" and "Cluster" levels presents a potential threat to the existing organizational principle of collective decision making by the Party Committee at each territorial echelon, since these two functions are not considered as a territorial entity. The Hoc Tap article found it necessary to emphasize that, "Naturally, the Area is not an intermediary echelon, and the Standing Committee member in charge of an Area should not be the only hero in his locality. It is necessary to regulate the work habits in order to insure collective and uniform leadership of the District Party Committee and its
Standing Committee." Whether this admonition applied to the situation in the South, and whether or not it indicated that the organizational decentralization that was taking place in both North and South Vietnam were related developments, is a judgment that must be reserved pending further developments in the evolution of the organizational arrangements between districts and villages.

The enlarged role of district cadres suggests an area of organizational vulnerability, given the essentiality of their function as coordinating and decision-making links between the village and higher levels. The interception and arrest of a single one of these vital cadres might occasion more erosion of the political and logistical support structure at the district or village level than the loss of a number of Guerrillas. In fact, the function of the exercise of a balanced force concept by the Viet Cong in a given territorial jurisdiction is to shield the activities of these essential personnel at the district and village level. Both the individual cadres performing this function and the communications process itself may be weakened by frequent and continuing small unit operations, which, while not directed at specific individuals, may constrain the movement of these cadres and inhibit their ability to maintain liaison with their superiors and subordinates.

PACIFICATION CONSTRAINTS ON LOCAL FORCE ACTIVITIES

To focus on only one aspect of the entire complex of organization, personnel, strategy, and tactics obscures the main strength of the Viet Cong system, the integration of all aspects of their operations. Even so, the range of
activities of a readily identifiable component of the system, such as the 514th Province Local Force Battalion, can be suggestive of system effectiveness.

As indicated in the previous chapter, the unit history of this battalion reflects the rise of Viet Cong fortunes in Dinh Tuong province. In June of 1961, the first company strength unit of the 514th saw action. By 1963, it could operate as a battalion and participated in the Viet Cong victory at Ap Bac. In 1965, again at Ap Bac, the battalion was defeated by an aggressive ARVN force and before it could regain its combat effectiveness was faced with the onset of the GVN pacification program of 1966.

Whether by accident or design, GVN pacification operations in the Binh Duc/Thanh Phu and Tam Hiep areas, while primarily intended to protect the approaches to My Tho and the U.S. base near that town, had also the effect of curtailing Viet Cong access to the "Tan Family" area. Thus, it became difficult for elements of the 514th to operate in the eastern portion of "My Tho" province. The 514th Battalion, which in previous years had operated throughout the province, found its effective operational area progressively reduced during 1966 to the western three districts. Although the military strategy of the Viet Cong calls for liberal use of dispersed forces, any reduction in operational area also reduces the ability of a large unit to do this.

In the first half of 1967, the 514th Battalion encountered U.S. units in three major engagements. In all three cases the bulk of the battalion was found concentrated in one place. The dilemma facing the Viet Cong was that if they were to maintain their territorial control over the
"liberated" areas, the previous strategy of deploying elements of their units to move around through the various prepared fortified positions in these areas would have to be adhered to. At the same time, the size of unit required to hold these positions against the increased mobility and firepower of the opposition had increased.

The heavy casualties sustained by the 514th Bn during May 1967 necessitated a pause for reconsolidation. No interview source, as of late November 1967, had mentioned any combat engagements of the 514th Bn since May. In mid-November, however, a combined force of the 261st and 263rd Region Main Force Battalions attacked and penetrated the district town of Cai Lay, which was readily accessible from the Plain of Reeds, while the province capital and another district town were simultaneously mortared. This attack demonstrated, even before Tet 1968, that large Viet Cong units remained a present and potent danger to GVN controlled areas. Although the 514th played a major part in the Tet attack on My Tho, the order to prepare for Tet did not reach the province until the end of September.

These military developments, taking place against the background of the introduction of U.S. troops into Dinh Tuong province, point toward two possible conclusions. One possibility is that the operational area of the large units was becoming smaller, based on the fact that the major military actions of 1967 occurred further away from the pacified areas. While the Viet Cong units were obviously capable of inflicting serious damage on GVN-held areas, they had had this capability for at least four years, but were now attacking areas that had previously been
bypassed. This could be attributed to the fact that areas such as the Cai Lay district town were the closest major GVN areas to the Plain of Reeds rear base, and were more accessible to attack than more distant areas, since the supply and liaison problems became more complicated as these large units moved further away from their main rear areas.

A second possibility, heightened by the events of Tet, is that this was part of a general pattern of action, directed at creating insecurity in GVN areas, as the best means to disperse US/GVN security forces and regain the offensive initiative. In so doing, the defense of Viet Cong controlled areas would be aided by a relief of the pressure that could be brought to bear on these areas. The Viet Cong view of the military problem posed by U.S. troops units in the Delta indicated that they did not hope to counter these units by direct offensive attack, but by forcing a dispersion of these units. The increase in mid and late 1967 of incidents of mining along the National Highway was a warning indicator of the Viet Cong intention of exerting maximum pressure on GVN areas.

These strategies, however, raise the question of whether or not a fundamental change had occurred in the nature of military action in the Delta. The continuity and frequency of U.S. clearing operations in the 20/7 Zone created problems for the political structure in these villages, as well as the military units that had been operating in this area.
VI. THE VIET CONG AS A BALANCED SYSTEM: SOME OBSERVATIONS

The Viet Cong are more than a Mafia plus ideology: theirs is a sophisticated political-military control system with the end objective of establishing control over both territory and people. Political and military efforts are balanced to this end. Political activity lays the foundation for military operations: military operations are only undertaken for political reasons. Further, within both political and military organizations, levels of activity are carefully balanced. Politically, a mutually supporting balance is structured among organizations at the hamlet, village, and district levels. Militarily, this mutual balancing and support is obtained among Guerrilla, Local Force, and Main Force activities.

To focus on only one aspect of the entire complex of organization, personnel, strategy, and tactics obscures the main strength of the Viet Cong -- the balanced and mutually supporting integration of all aspects of their operations. Some elements of the system are vulnerable, but are able to survive because they are balanced off and supported by others. The reverse is also true: vulnerable elements within the system threaten the survival of strong elements. But the system as a whole is stronger than the sum of its parts.

Despite its strengths and its successes, the Viet Cong system is bureaucratic and cumbersome. In that it relies on intensive communications and delicate balancing of forces, military and political, to maintain system
momentum, it is sensitive to interventions that disrupt communications and balance. From the brief summary of recent historical experience recounted in the foregoing chapters, the following would appear to be factors that need to be dealt with in a sophisticated assault on the system, at least in this one province.

The system is face-to-face communications intensive. As illustrated by the pacification experience in the Tam Hiep and Binh Duc areas, maintenance of the Viet Cong control system demands that its operatives be heavily involved in indoctrination sessions, planning groups, visits to subordinates to monitor and give instructions and to superiors to receive them, and in a variety of agitational activities that seem necessary to sustain adherence to system objectives. Intervention in this process, whether by broad geographical denial, interception of essential cadres, or cutting off local lines of communications isolates the activists from those whose adherence to the movement is marginal at best or who remain in the system because of their personal risk-benefit calculations.

Those cadres who provide the link between district and village operations play an essential role in maintaining the effectiveness of the Viet Cong system. These are the organizers, activists, and operatives whose activities are shielded by the general military threat posed by the Viet Cong military arm. Anything that erodes their feelings of personal security -- military action that drives major VC units from an area, random small unit patrols by government forces, ambushes set by commando units, suspicion engendered by arrests, detention, and
subsequent release of persons with whom these key cadres may be in contact -- may inhibit these cadres in the performance of functions essential to system effectiveness. The response of the Viet Cong to the pacification program of 1966-1967, which was both to reorganize in ways that delegated decision making authority to this level of officials and, perhaps more importantly, to draw upon higher level cadres and send down to this level persons of particular skill, training, and experience, suggests the importance attached by the Viet Cong leadership to maintaining a high level of performance in these functions.

In contrast, the marginal adherent or participant in the activities of the Viet Cong system is individually unimportant, although collectively he furnishes the connective tissue of the movement. The marginal adherent is both expendable and replaceable: little if anything is invested in his training. His participation in the movement is frequently little more than recognition of "primary power." Considering his lack of commitment, he may even welcome a brief period of detention, particularly if treated well and if his family does not suffer thereby, as giving him an opportunity to disengage from the movement (which would hold him suspect for a considerable period as a result) by making him a "legal" person in the eyes of the government. The essential point is that it is counterproductive to punish such persons during pacification. In fact, punitive action against these marginal participants may imbed them in the Viet Cong system, as it may appear to them as the only possible course.

In general, the function of the Viet Cong military force is to assure the greater freedom of the political
arm. But this is a balanced relationship: the political organization creates logistical support for the military arm. In Viet Cong controlled areas, the presence, or the threat of presence, of sizeable Local or Main Force units posits a threshold of force needed for pacification or even "search and destroy" units to enter the area. Tactically always defensive in their own areas, Viet Cong military units normally sally into contested or government controlled areas for the political objective of asserting a "Viet Cong presence." Part of this political purpose is the demoralization and disintegration of the GVN, which the Viet Cong expect to flow from continued military pressures. This establishes a point of entry for political organizers and activists. Reciprocally, the political organizers and activists create the control system that nourishes and sustains further military activity.

Viet Cong military capability depends upon a careful balance among its three types of units. Guerrilla units, to operate freely, need to feel that Viet Cong Local Force or Main Force units shield them from inadvertent encounter with regular government forces. Local Force in turn relies upon the potential presence of Main Force to ensure that government units must be of such size to enter their area of operations as to give warning of their approach. And without Local Force and guerrilla force active in an area to check out the structure of fortified resting places, stored supplies, and logistical support, not to mention intelligence and security, Main Force units are disinclined to enter the area. To upset the 'infrastructure' of fortified resting places increases both the risk to Local Force
units when they do concentrate and the need for them to concentrate for want of alternative safehavens. Thus, to drive the Local Force from an area is to upset the balance of force relationship, leaving the guerrillas vulnerable because of their small unit size and the Main Force unable to enter the contest because, without Local Force cover, Main Force units become highly visible.

Relevant to pacification planning is the observation that the geography and the strategic placement of Dinh Tuong make the province essential to the maintenance of balance in the Viet Cong system in much of the Delta. Since large areas of the province are relatively open country, sparsely populated, major Viet Cong units have restricted lines of movement. Access to and egress from the Plain of Reeds is limited to a few points. Viet Cong lines of communication between the Plain of Reeds and their controlled areas in Kien Hoa province and between Kien Hoa and the Iron Triangle area northwest of Saigon would be interdicted if major portions of Dinh Tuong were brought under close government control. Terrain unfavorable to major Viet Cong military activity together with the strategic essentiality of the province favor the conduct of pacification operations to which the Viet Cong in this area have been extremely sensitive.

Finally, the view of the Viet Cong as a system implies a need to deal with it systematically. It is useful, of course, to apply pressure at particular points of the enemy's system, to break down where possible his face-to-face and other communications, to apprehend or drive to cover those cadres who provide the district-village links, to surprise
or destroy or force out of operation his military forces or even to upset the balance among Guerrilla, Local Force, and Main Force activity that is prized by Viet Cong doctrine, and to bring selected areas under government control. Given the capacity of the Viet Cong structure to adapt, however, simultaneous pressure on the system at a number of points may be required. This should include explicit recognition of the need to take the local requirements and operations of the enemy system into consideration when planning counteroperations.

Pacification priorities and approaches should be determined not only on the basis of what might facilitate government operations (such as opening roads from X to Y, or to collect taxes and administer justice in village Z), but also in terms of what will interfere with or block what the enemy is doing or is trying to do in a given area. As has been clearly shown, government and Viet Cong communications lines and government and Viet Cong views of the strategic and tactical situation are not always co-terminous and an area, which on other grounds might have relatively low priority to the government, might assume great import because of its utility to the enemy. Viet Cong fears of the mobility that U.S. forces bring to military operations, their preoccupation with maintaining communications and providing leadership, and their concern over loss of control in areas that they regard as strategically important could be systematically exploited.