

ONE

A Temporary Expedient

The Origins of Civic Action in Vietnam

When Ngô Đình Diệm assumed power as prime minister of the State of Vietnam on July 7, 1954 he inherited a politically and geographically divided state. Since December 1946 the Việt Minh – an amalgam of Vietnamese nationalist groups led clandestinely by the Vietnamese communists – had been fighting a brutal war of decolonization against French and colonial forces attempting to hold on to their Southeast Asian colony. Unable to overcome the Việt Minh’s nationalist appeal by force of arms, the French, in concert with the former Vietnamese emperor, established the State of Vietnam with Bảo Đại as the chief of state on March 8, 1949. This new government would receive limited independence as an Associated State within the French Union – a successor organization to the French empire whose associative nature was intended to be more collaborative in governance than the old imperial structure. Under this new regime, the Vietnamese would be permitted more freedom to manage their domestic affairs, but foreign and defense policy would remain firmly under French control. Both Bảo Đại and the French hoped his standing as what they conceived to be a more legitimate Vietnamese leader would undercut the Việt Minh’s claim to represent the national aspirations of the Vietnamese people in light of their communist ties which, in a Cold War context, could make them appear beholden to the machinations of a foreign power – the USSR.¹ Unfortunately this was not the case and the war

¹ For a discussion of the creation of the State of Vietnam see Kathryn C. Statler, *Replacing France: The Origins of American Intervention in Vietnam* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 16–17; Fredrik Logevall, *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America’s Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 2012), 210–212; Jessica Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and 1950s*

raged on until representatives of France and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) – the independent Vietnamese political entity established by the leadership of the Việt Minh at the end of World War II – met in Geneva in the spring of 1954 to negotiate an end to the hostilities.

The Geneva Accords, signed on July 21, 1954, two weeks after Diệm's appointment as prime minister, brought the fighting to a close and divided Vietnam into two regroupment zones for Việt Minh and French forces on either side of the seventeenth parallel.² This territorial division was intended to be a temporary measure that would be resolved within two years by national elections to determine the political future of a unified Vietnam. Under the provisions of the Accords, the Vietnamese people would have a choice between the leadership of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam or the government Ngô Đình Diệm led, the French-sponsored State of Vietnam.

To win these elections, Diệm would have to convince the population of Vietnam that he was the leader of a government that could both provide for the people and serve as a national unifying force capable of bringing a fragmented society together. This was no easy task given that the deck was heavily stacked against Diệm in Vietnam. In the north, he could count on virtually no popular support as any individuals likely to choose his government in the 1956 referendum were “voting with their feet” and using the regroupment provision of the Geneva Accords to move south. Over a period of 300 days following the implementation of the Accords, nearly one million refugees including approximately 800,000 of Diệm's Catholic co-religionists from north of the seventeenth parallel moved south fearing the prospect of life under a communist regime.³ This left the south, where Diệm's government should have been able to wield its influence, as the main source of potential support. But due to a combination of circumstance, French design and the legacies of war

Southern Vietnam (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013), 44–47; and Edward Miller, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States and the Fate of South Vietnam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 34–35.

² According to Fredrik Logevall, the Accords were signed in the morning of July 21, but dated July 20 to allow Pierre Mendès France, the French premier who had staked his premiership on reaching an agreement by July 20, to “save face.” Logevall, *Embers of War*, 605.

³ George McTurnan Kahin, *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986), 76–77; David L. Anderson, *Trapped by Success: The Eisenhower Administration and Vietnam, 1953–1961* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 77–78; and Seth Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam: Ngo Dinh Diem, Religion, Race, and U.S. Intervention in Southeast Asia* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 129–138.

his government actually exerted very little control below the seventeenth parallel. The vast and sparsely populated Mekong Delta had only just come under ethnic Vietnamese control prior to the arrival of the French, making it a polyglot territory of distinct and isolated communities with little allegiance to any central state. Elsewhere, huge swaths of land were controlled by millenial religious sects that emerged in opposition to the French or isolated ethnic minorities that had occupied their land for generations. In both cases, they had been able to enjoy some semblance of autonomy as part of the colonial regime's divide-and-rule tactics.⁴ Finally, the Việt Minh, which had demonstrated its nationalist mettle by forcing the French to abandon the northern half of Vietnam, enjoyed considerable sympathy among the remainder of the southern population. This was particularly disconcerting as Diệm could make no such claim while the government he headed and the bureaucracy he inherited were both products of the French colonial system. Many administrators were part of the French colonial apparatus and Diệm had very little confidence in their abilities, viewing them as *fonctionnaires* with little interest in pursuing the nationalist cause he would be advancing. Overcoming these obstacles to his authority would require a government initiative to convince the southern population that there was an alternative Vietnamese authority in Sài Gòn worth rallying around. Diệm's Civic Action program was intended to fill that role.

NGÔ ĐÌNH DIỆM AND THE LEGACY OF THE FIRST INDOCHINA WAR

The South Vietnamese nation that Ngô Đình Diệm would attempt to fashion over the course of his tenure had its origins in the Geneva Accords. They represented the international complexities occasioned by the intersection of the forces of decolonization with the global Cold War. The Accords were the result of an international conference convened in the Swiss city to try to bring the bloodletting between the French and Việt Minh forces on the Indochinese peninsula to a halt. By the summer of 1953 it was evident that neither side could deliver the knock-out blow to the other to achieve a decisive victory while significant war-weariness was setting in on both sides. Complicating the matter was the fact that the Việt Minh and the French had courted international support

⁴ The challenges these posed to Ngô Đình Diệm's authority will be examined in the next chapter.

for their respective causes from the two camps of the Cold War. The Việt Minh's government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam had been recognized as the legitimate government of the entire territory of Vietnam by the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China, while the French-backed State of Vietnam had received the same recognition from the United States and Great Britain. With recognition came military and economic aid and a commitment of international credibility, increasing the potential stakes of this war of decolonization considerably. Rather than see the conflict in Southeast Asia spin out of control and risk triggering a superpower confrontation in an area considered peripheral to the Cold War, leaders from the Great Powers – Britain, France, the United States and the Soviet Union – agreed at an international summit in Berlin in early 1954 to add the matter to a conference scheduled to be held in Geneva to try to resolve outstanding matters arising from the armistice that had recently ended the Korean War.⁵

The Indochinese portion of the conference opened in May 1954 and was chaired by Great Britain and the Soviet Union. The Democratic Republic of Vietnam was represented by Phạm Văn Đồng, while France was represented by Georges Bidault and Pierre Mendès France.⁶ The outcome of the deliberations reflected the realities on the ground. A day before the conference started the French received a staggering blow to their fortunes in Indochina when their airbase at Điện Biên Phủ fell to Việt Minh forces after more than three months of intense, bloody fighting.⁷ A significant psychological defeat for the French Union, it was not decisive for their military effort. The French still maintained a significant military presence in northern Vietnam while the Việt Minh presence in the south was quite weak. Moreover, the DRV's best forces were exhausted from the battle of Điện Biên Phủ and needed time to recover.⁸ Months of grueling combat would still be needed to achieve victory on the Việt Minh's terms. There was considerable doubt within the government of

⁵ For a good account of the events leading up to the Geneva Conference see James Waite, *The End of the First Indochina War: A Global History* (London: Routledge, 2012), 15–34. See also Statler, *Replacing France*, 51–84.

⁶ Georges Bidault, the French foreign minister in Joseph Laniel's government, was replaced by Pierre Mendès France when Laniel's government fell in the middle of the negotiations. Mendès France, the new premier, elected to handle the foreign ministry portfolio himself and dramatically promised to reach an agreement at the conference in thirty days or resign. Statler, *Replacing France*, 102.

⁷ For an excellent account of the battle of Điện Biên Phủ see Logevall, *Embers of War*, especially 381–546.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 537.

the DRV that the Vietnamese people could sustain this. The French, for their part, were well aware that a majority of the people in the metropole were resigned to abandoning their Southeast Asian colonies and simply wanted an end to what was now considered *la guerre sale*, or dirty war.⁹

After six weeks of hard bargaining, facilitated to a great degree by Zhou En-Lai of the People's Republic of China, who was in attendance due to his nation's position as the largest power in the region,¹⁰ both sides agreed to halt the fighting and temporarily divide Vietnam into two regroupment zones for forces representing either side at the seventeenth parallel. Soldiers fighting for the Việt Minh would regroup to the north of the demarcation line, while the armed forces of the French Union would move to the south. Within two years, a referendum would be held to determine under which government Vietnam would be reunified, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam located in Hà Nội or the State of Vietnam in Sài Gòn. Civilians were also allowed 300 days following the signing of the Accords to move across the seventeenth parallel in order to live under the government of their choice.¹¹

For the new premier of the State of Vietnam, the outcome of the Geneva Conference was extremely disappointing. Ngô Đình Diệm was a fierce nationalist and vehemently opposed to communism. As far as he was concerned, his was the legitimate government of the entire territory of Vietnam and it had been betrayed by the French. He refused to recognize either the Accords or the existence of the DRV. This stance represented the independent position he was attempting to carve out for Vietnam between the perpetuation of the colonial apparatus and adoption of the communist system maintained by the leadership of the Việt Minh. This position, in turn, was a reflection of Diệm himself.

Ngô Đình Diệm (see Figure 1) had been born to a prominent Catholic family in 1901. His father, Ngô Đình Khả, had been a member of the Imperial

⁹ Miller, *Misalliance*, 88–89.

¹⁰ The fighting in Indochina was occurring on the doorstep of the People's Republic of China, giving Beijing a vested interest in the outcome. Additionally, China's inclusion in the Geneva Conference reflected Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov's desire to promote the legitimacy of the Beijing government as representing a great power allied with Moscow as well as French premier Georges Bidault's preference to negotiate with the USSR and PRC rather than the Việt Minh as he felt they might be more amenable to meeting French demands in the global interest of world peace versus the local concerns of the Vietnamese; Waite, *End of the First Indochina War*, 29.

¹¹ Agreement on the Cessation of Hostilities in Vietnam, July 20, 1954, *Foreign Relations of the United States*, Vol. 16, *The Geneva Conference 1952–1954* (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1981), 1505–1520.

Court at Huế and instilled both Confucian and Catholic values in his children. Diệm had originally intended to dedicate his life to the church, but found monastic life to be too rigid and pursued a career in the civil service. A driven, energetic and studious individual, Diệm rose quickly through the colonial administration, becoming a provincial governor by the age of twenty-eight. In May of 1933, Vietnam's young emperor, Bảo Đại, made Diệm the Minister of the Interior. His service as a member of the Imperial Cabinet was short-lived, however. After a period of only three months, Diệm resigned in protest when his request to the French for more political autonomy for the Vietnamese government went unfulfilled. This courageous act of defiance demonstrated a stubborn, self-righteous integrity that bordered on obstinacy and enhanced his reputation as an incorruptible nationalist.¹²

During World War II, Diệm engaged in various anti-French intrigues which nearly got him arrested by the *Sûreté*. He was saved by his efforts to exploit the sympathies of some of Vietnam's more "idealist" Japanese occupiers who bristled at the fact that Tokyo, despite its stated aim of an "Asia for Asians," permitted the Vichy French colonial government to maintain control over Vietnam. The Japanese Consul in Huế helped him escape to Sài Gòn where he remained politically active.¹³ In early 1946, Diệm was brought before Hồ Chí Minh, the founder of the Việt Minh, who asked him to join them. Diệm refused, apparently citing as reason the death of his older brother at the hands of the Việt Minh the year before and a suspicion that he would not be a full partner in any future government.¹⁴ In the short run, Diệm's opposition to both the Việt Minh and the French did him few favors. Once World War II ended and the war with the French commenced, Diệm's refusal to support either side garnered him the reputation as an *attentiste*, or fence-sitter.¹⁵

Over the next few years, Diệm shrewdly used this opportunity to try to establish an independent position between the two poles of communism

¹² Catton, *Diem's Final Failure*, 6; Miller, *Misalliance*, 26; Statler, *Replacing France*, 118; See also Dennis Warner, *The Last Confucian: Vietnam, Southeast Asia and the West* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), 69–71.

¹³ Miller, *Misalliance*, 29–31.

¹⁴ Ellen J. Hammer, *The Struggle for Indochina: 1940–1955: Viet Nam and the French Experience* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1966), 101 and 149–150. Ngô Đình Khôi had preceded Diệm into the civil service. He was equally as opposed to communism as Diệm and had been executed by being buried alive, along with his son, by the Việt Minh for his views. For a more spirited account of Khôi's death and Diệm's confrontation with Hồ Chí Minh see Warner, *The Last Confucian*, 66–68.

¹⁵ Miller, *Misalliance*, 32.



FIGURE 1 Ngô Đình Diệm reading the proclamation of the Republic of Vietnam, 1955. Bettmann, Getty Images

and colonialism. He approached other like-minded leaders and groups to join him, including members of the Việt Minh who were not enamored with some of its communist inclinations. When the Elysée Accords were announced in June 1949, Diệm publicly denounced them, releasing his own statement that indicated he possessed an alternative vision for Vietnam to that of the French or the Vietnamese communists that was tantamount to a “social revolution.” Though this was only a pro-tem vision, it would evolve, as we shall see, and form the basis of his platform for national development.¹⁶ Just as importantly, it reflected Diệm’s remarkable confidence in himself and his abilities, suggesting that he saw himself as holding the key to the creation of a viable, independent Vietnamese state. Unfortunately, at the time it only earned Diệm the enmity of both the Việt Minh and the French. He found himself on a Việt

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 36.

Minh hit-list and, without the protection of the colonial government, he was forced to leave Vietnam in 1950.

Even though Diệm's exile removed him from direct engagement with the political scene in Vietnam, his time away proved to be extremely important for his political fortunes. During this period, Diệm spent time in Japan, Europe and the United States. In the two-and-a-half years he spent in the United States, he made several entreaties to various officials in the State Department. Unfortunately, officials there showed little interest in what Diệm had to say. Diệm did, however, earn points with other prominent officials in the United States including Francis Cardinal Spellman, Democratic Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield, former Office of Strategic Services chief William Donovan and Justice William O. Douglas. While these individuals could relate to Diệm's adherence to a Western religion and laud his opposition to communism – especially at a time when they were mired in their own devastating efforts to root out alleged domestic subversives – they were particularly impressed by Diệm's pleas for a “Third Force” in Indochina between communism and colonialism. Many American officials worried that French efforts to cling to their colonial possessions were only aiding the communists, who could use this to their advantage by claiming they were the true champions of national liberation. Diệm was a refreshing alternative whose credentials appeared to match their desires for a postcolonial leader.¹⁷

In the meantime, members of Diệm's family worked behind the scenes to further his political prospects in Vietnam. A key player was his immediate junior in the family, his brother Ngô Đình Nhu.¹⁸ Nhu was the family intellect, having attended France's *École de Chartes*. In the early 1950s, Nhu promoted Diệm's cause among the Vietnamese noncommunist intelligentsia through the journal *Xã Hội (Society)*. At the same time, he proved to be quite adept at political organization, forming a Trade Union movement and the nucleus of a political party based on Diệm's nascent ideas for nationhood. This latter organization, initially created

¹⁷ Joseph Buttinger, *Vietnam: A Dragon Embattled*, Vol. II, *Vietnam at War* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1967), 846–847; Catton, *Diem's Final Failure*, 6; Miller, *Misalliance*, 31–41; Statler, *Replacing France*, 118.

¹⁸ Other members in his immediate family who were important in Diệm's rise to power were his eldest surviving brother, Ngô Đình Thục, the Bishop of Vinh Long province; his younger brother Ngô Đình Cẩn, who ruled Central Vietnam as his personal fief from the family home in Huế; and his youngest brother, Ngô Đình Luyện, who spoke several languages and lived in Europe, which facilitated access to certain dignitaries and made him a vital conduit to the Emperor Bảo Đại who preferred the decadence of the French Riviera to ruling in Vietnam; Miller, *Misalliance*, 42.

to lobby on Diệm's behalf, became the *Đảng Cần Lao Nhân Vị* (The Vietnamese Personalist Labor Party), more commonly known as the *Cần Lao* – a semi-secret party whose members were organized into cells that, once Diệm assumed power, infiltrated the state bureaucracy to better control it.

By 1953, Nhu was able to seize on rising impatience among noncommunist nationalists toward Bảo Đại's gradualist approach to acquiring outright independence from the French. He manipulated the situation to force the emperor to consider appointing an individual with Diệm's anti-French and anticommunist stature to command a prominent role in his cabinet to quell the rising discontent. Neither Diệm nor Bảo Đại held each other in very high regard. Diệm saw Bảo Đại as a weak leader, readily willing to supplicate himself to the French and the trappings of his exalted position at the expense of the Vietnamese people. For Bảo Đại, Diệm was too high-minded and stubborn. Nevertheless, both could use the other to achieve what he wanted. Diệm could finally attain a position of power through which he could begin the process of realizing his nationalist vision for an independent noncommunist Vietnam. Bảo Đại could use Diệm for both his nationalist credentials and his American connections, which the emperor deemed increasingly important as France's imperial forces in Indochina continued to wane at the hands of the Việt Minh. On June 16, 1954, the two entered into a marriage of convenience when Diệm formally agreed to Bảo Đại's request that he form a cabinet.¹⁹ Even with the emperor's endorsement, however, Diệm found himself at a decided disadvantage in the impending contest to lead an independent Vietnam.

By compelling the French forces to sue for peace and, by extension, recognize Vietnamese independence above the seventeenth parallel, Hồ Chí Minh, the leader of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, had legitimized his nationalist credentials in the eyes of many of the Vietnamese people and seized the upper hand. Diệm viewed Hồ Chí Minh as a communist dupe who was interfering in Vietnam's progression from colonial state to sovereign nation. If Hồ was allowed to succeed, Diệm feared, Vietnam would disappear as an independent political entity and become nothing more than "a southern province of Communist China."²⁰ However, for

¹⁹ Catton, *Diem's Final Failure*, 7 and 15–16; Miller, *Misalliance*, 49–53.

²⁰ See Catton, *Diem's Final Failure*, 27–28 for the quotation. See also the Speech of the Head of Vietnam's Delegation to the Bandung Conference, April 29, 1955, Item number 2321503034, Texas Tech Virtual Vietnam Archive, www.virtualarchive.vietnam.ttu.edu (hereafter referred to as TTVVA) (accessed March 25, 2009).

Diệm to have any chance of countering Hồ Chí Minh's appeal he would need to contend with the myriad challenges to his authority that were a product of Vietnam's colonial experience and produce some semblance of a national vision of his own to rival that of Hồ's socialist republic. But before he could even do that, he needed to find a way extend his political reach beyond the capital city of Sài Gòn and the other locations where his regime enjoyed a modicum of political control.

Expanding his government's writ into the countryside was crucial for Diệm to have any chance of advancing his national vision of an independent, noncommunist Vietnam, much less winning the elections scheduled for July 1956. This would be difficult as seven-and-a-half years of war with the French had left significant portions of the countryside devoid of any government presence. Moreover, the countryside contained a population that was in ferment. Individual members of the peasantry were wrestling with their own questions about the state, society and what an independent Vietnam might look like.²¹ The new premier would have to find a means to fill the gap between the government and the people and try to respond to their needs as quickly as possible.

KIẾU CÔNG CUNG AND THE ORIGINS OF CIVIC ACTION

With only two years to establish a firm presence throughout the countryside before the national elections, the Sài Gòn government needed to work quickly. Of particular concern were the so-called "liberated areas." These were two areas in central and southern Vietnam that had been administered by the Việt Minh during the war with the French that were now to be placed under the control of the southern government as stipulated by the Geneva Accords.²² The Sài Gòn government needed to fill the administrative vacuum left by the departing Việt Minh and counter what Diệm saw as Việt Minh efforts to "embarrass" his new regime through tax moratoriums, land redistribution and construction projects, such as new schools, to improve the lot of the peasantry.²³

²¹ David Hunt, *Vietnam's Southern Revolution: From Peasant Insurrection to Total War* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008), 10–28.

²² The two areas consisted of the central Vietnamese provinces of Quảng Nam, Quảng Ngãi, Phú Yên and Bình Định and some districts of the southern provinces of Quảng Trị and Bình Thuận.

²³ Re-establishing civil administration in liberated areas of Central Vietnam, ND, Subject Files 1954–1958 (hereafter referred to as SF 54–58), Box 1, Record Group 469 (hereafter

The government was in a poor position to fill this void. The central government had failed to reach beyond the towns under the French colonial system, resulting in the neglect of the villages where the mass of the people lived.²⁴ Eighty percent of government employees were concentrated in the Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn area alone.²⁵ Many of what the Diệm regime referred to as “modern public services,” such as those of the Ministries of Public Works and Information, failed to reach beyond the provincial capitals.²⁶ This scenario perpetuated itself because many members of the administrative organizations Diệm had inherited had been trained in accordance with the old colonial methods and regulations and maintained the same hierarchical structure that concentrated services and staff in the provincial centers. Those that had entered the bureaucracy after the French returned in 1945, Diệm believed, had learned to defer to French judgment and rarely attained any position that required meaningful decision-making. This “*fonctionnaire* spirit” made them little more than appendages of the colonial state.²⁷ Consequently, Diệm did not hold them in high regard, questioning their moral acumen.²⁸ With such poor and dysfunctional leadership, the government believed, the rural population remained in a politically, socially and culturally backward and benighted state.²⁹ Their loyalties had “been extended to whatever party, religious sect or local warlord ... seemed to care for their welfare,” while the lack of public services in the villages had prevented the local population from being kept abreast of “the social and economic changes which have taken place in larger towns and cities.”³⁰

referred to as RG 469), National Archives and Records Administration (hereafter referred to as NARA).

²⁴ Critical Note and Proposals of the Secretary of State at the Presidency, ND, SF 54–58, Box 1, RG 469, NARA; and Report on the Organization of the Special Commissariat for Civic Action, June 1957, Folder 82, Box 660, Michigan State University Vietnam Advisory Group (hereafter MSUVAG), Michigan State University Archives (hereafter MSUA).

²⁵ Civic Action, ND, SF 54–58, Box 1, RG 469, NARA; and Report on the Organization of the Special Commissariat for Civic Action, June 1957, Folder 82, Box 660, MSUVAG, MSUA.

²⁶ Critical Note and Proposals of the Secretary of State at the Presidency, ND, SF 54–58, Box 1, RG 469, NARA.

²⁷ For a discussion of the *fonctionnaire* spirit, see Robert Scigliano, *South Vietnam: Nation Under Stress: An Important Look at the Trouble Spot of Asia* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1964), 38.

²⁸ Miller, *Misalliance*, 89 and 134. See also William Colby with James McCargar, *Lost Victory: A Firsthand Account of America's Sixteen-Year Involvement in Vietnam* (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1989), 86; and Catton, *Diem's Final Failure*, 127.

²⁹ Critical Note and Proposals of the Secretary of State at the Presidency, ND, SF 54–58, Box 1, RG 469, NARA.

³⁰ Civic Action, ND, SF 54–58, Box 1, RG 469, NARA.

To make matters worse, the Diệm regime was acutely aware that the departing Việt Minh were leaving undercover “stay-behind” agents in their wake to agitate on behalf of the communist government in Hà Nội in preparation for the upcoming elections. It saw itself at a decided disadvantage in this competition. Communist agents could easily exploit the rural poverty caused by seven-and-a-half years of war and roughly eighty years of French colonial rule to highlight the inability of the Sài Gòn government to help its citizens. The central government feared these communist agitators would also be able to capitalize on the limited presence of the government administrators at the local level to more easily infiltrate anti-regime elements into the ranks of the village community.³¹

As David Hunt has shown, much of the South Vietnamese peasantry was grappling with the question of how best to “safeguard their lives and futures” at the mid-point of the twentieth century.³² They were dependent on “fragile” household economies for survival that were often based on subsistence farming, low wage jobs or trade in marketplaces that could be far away. In some cases, they were the products of single-parent families that had endured the disruption of the French war and lost relatives in the fighting.³³ In the wake of the Geneva Accords, Hunt continues, many in the province of Định Tường (Mỹ Tho),³⁴ frustrated with what they felt to be the confines of this rural existence, took it upon themselves to “control their own destiny” and set out for the more urban centers in the hopes of a “better life.” For some, the district capitals offered a way out. Others found an insurmountable gulf existed between the rural ways they were accustomed to and the urban demands they were met with. Rather than material gain and social justice, these peasants encountered alienation and hardship. As Hunt argues, these positive and negative encounters with the urban centers broadened the consciousness of a generation of the Định Tường peasantry, providing them with a greater awareness of the urban–rural divide and the multiple possibilities it offered for alternative ways of living that escaped those who had only been exposed to life in the towns and cities.³⁵

³¹ Critical Note and Proposals of the Secretary of State at the Presidency, ND, SF 54–58, Box 1, RG 469, NARA; and Civic Action, ND, SF 54–58, Box 1, RG 469, NARA.

³² Hunt, *Vietnam's Southern Revolution*, 9.

³³ *Ibid.*, 13–14.

³⁴ During the period of French rule this province was known as Mỹ Tho, following the end of the Franco-Việt Minh war it was called Định Tường.

³⁵ Hunt, *Vietnam's Southern Revolution*, 9–21. The first quote can be found on page 9 and the second one can be found on page 15.

At the same time, Hunt demonstrates that a generational shift was at work as a new youth culture began to emerge among the peasantry. Encouraged by the development of a consumer culture and the opportunities it offered for “self-transformation,” youth challenged what they saw as antiquated patterns of filial piety, choosing their own partners rather than entering into arranged marriages or finding an alternative source of livelihood from the family farm.³⁶ All of this restiveness produced a potentially fertile environment for opponents of the regime to sow the seeds of revolt.³⁷

To address this situation, Ngô Đình Diệm issued a directive on national security action for the Vietnamese Army on December 31, 1954 that placed all of the unsecured provinces in South Vietnam under military authority. This program, also known as “pacification” by the Americans, was drafted with the assistance of Rufus Phillips, a second lieutenant in the US Army detailed to the Central Intelligence Agency. It would be run through the South Vietnamese Ministry of Defense and was initially intended to use *Groupes Administratifs Mobiles* (GAM) to try to establish a governmental administrative presence in the districts and villages of the liberated zones. The GAM portion of this directive, however, was never implemented as Diệm realized shortly thereafter that during the Franco-Vietnamese War the French had attempted to use GAMs in their effort to defeat the Việt Minh in the north and central provinces to no avail.³⁸

Ironically, Diệm’s concern was not motivated by the fact that the GAMs were attempting to extend the reach of a foreign occupier down to the village level. As he saw it, the Việt Minh, under the control of the communists, were simply puppets of Moscow or Beijing and therefore attempting to do much the same. His opposition to the plan stemmed

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 26–27.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

³⁸ Instruction Presidenciale, December 31, 1954, Folder 14651, Phủ Thủ Tướng Chính Phủ [Office of the Prime Minister of the Government] (hereafter PTTCP), Trung Tâm Lưu Trữ Quốc Gia II [National Archives Number 2] (hereafter TTLTQG2); and Note: Sur la Creation et L’Organisation d’un Commissariat General a L’Action Civique (charge de gagner la population a la cause nationale) [Note on the Creation of the Special Commissariat for Civic Action (charged with winning the population to the national cause)], ND, Folder 1463, Phủ Tổng Thống Đế Nhất Cộng Hòa [Office of the President of the First Republic] (hereafter PTTĐICH), TTLTQG2. For Phillips’ assistance in the drafting of the National Security Action Memorandum see Rufus Phillips, “Before We Lost in South Vietnam,” in *Prelude to Tragedy: Vietnam, 1960–1965*, eds. Harvey Neese and John O’Donnell (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2001), 14; and Rufus Phillips, *Why Vietnam Matters: An Eyewitness Account of Lessons Not Learned* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2008), 32–33.

from the perceived strategic and administrative shortcomings of the GAMs. For one thing, their presence in the villages had been so fleeting compared to that of the Việt Minh, who were already entrenched there, that the Việt Minh could easily reassert themselves once the GAMs had left. For another, the strictly administrative nature and organizational structure of the GAMs was inadequate for the task as Diệm conceived it. He felt it had been too top-heavy and therefore incapable of forging any meaningful and lasting connection with the villagers on a personal level. The GAMs had not allowed the French to extend the base of their administrative organization to the grassroots level, making the effort largely ineffective as far as Ngô Đình Diệm was concerned.³⁹

Americans on the ground in Vietnam supported Diệm's proposed pacification plan. One of the most prominent was Rufus Phillips' boss, Colonel Edward Lansdale, an Air Force officer detailed to the Central Intelligence Agency. A close confidant of Diệm's and self-proclaimed expert on psychological and unconventional warfare, Lansdale had been sent by Washington to help the South Vietnamese premier thwart the perceived communist threat. Many of the ideas presented in the pacification plan had been drawn from Lansdale's experiences in the Philippines where he had helped the Secretary of Defense, Ramon Magsaysay, defeat the communist-led Huk insurgency in the early 1950s. Lansdale hoped he could work the same magic in South Vietnam and strongly endorsed the "National Action" Plan as an "integral part" of the larger effort to "establish government" and its "benefits" below the seventeenth parallel.⁴⁰

The United States Operations Mission (USOM) – the International Cooperation Administration's (ICA) representative organ in Sài Gòn – showed similar support. They pushed strongly for American aid for the

³⁹ Civic Activities of the Military, Southeast Asia, March 13, 1959, Item number 12050107012, TTVVA (accessed January 29, 2007); Critical Note and Proposals of the Secretary of State at the Presidency, ND, SF 54–58, Box 1, RG 469, NARA; Report on the Project No. 2 on the creation and organization of the Commissionership of Civic Action, ND, SF 54–58, Box 1, RG 469, NARA; Civic Action, ND, SF 54–58, Box 1, RG 469, NARA; Memorandum for Collins from John E. Dwan, March 8, 1955, Lansdale, Edward G. (Colonel) 2, Box 28, Collins Papers (hereafter CP), Dwight D. Eisenhower Library (hereafter DDEL); and Wesley R. Fishel, *Vietnam: Anatomy of a Conflict* (Itasca, IL: F.E. Peacock Publishers, 1968), 597.

⁴⁰ Memorandum to Collins from Edward G. Lansdale, January 3, 1955, Lansdale, Edward G. (Colonel) 2, Box 28, CP, DDEL. See also Jonathan Nashel, *Edward Lansdale's Cold War* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005), 49–76. For the significance of Lansdale's role in the Philippines on the National Security Action Plan see Thomas L. Ahern, Jr., *CIA and Rural Pacification in South Vietnam* (Langley, VA: Center for the Study of Intelligence, declassified 2007), 5–7 and Phillips, *Why Vietnam Matters*, 32–33.

program. A draft document entitled “Re-establishing Civil Administration in Liberated Areas of Central Vietnam” articulated the hope that this effort would “have long-range significance as a step in broadening the democratic base of the national government.” Pacification, the document argued, could improve the line of communication between Sài Gòn and the countryside that the highly centralized French colonial apparatus had weakened. This improved communication, in turn, could have a “significant effect on the local sense of participation in, and responsiveness to, the national government and upon the Regional and National Government’s knowledge of and responsiveness to local needs and desires.” Such coordination and improved governance, it concluded, were “necessary prerequisites for the effective implementation of Foreign Operations Administration projects in all fields that involve local participation.”⁴¹

In the interim, a former member of the Việt Minh, Kiêu Công Cung, was approached by Hồ Thông Minh, the South Vietnamese Minister of Defense, to study the problems in the countryside and come up with a new pacification plan to replace the defunct GAM proposal. The Diệm government had been directed to Cung by Edward Lansdale. According to Lansdale, Cung approached the CIA operative at his Sài Gòn quarters in January 1955. During this encounter, Cung told Lansdale that he had heard the American “was trying to help Vietnam and that he [Cung] had some ideas of what needed doing.” As Lansdale recalls, Cung began outlining a plan he had conceived to train members of South Vietnam’s civil service to go out into the villages, dress like the peasantry and engage in manual labor to “serve the people” and help establish “self-government.” This plan was intended to help lay a foundation of rural support for South Vietnamese premier Ngô Đình Diệm in preparation for the national elections scheduled to be held in the summer of 1956. Lansdale records that he was intrigued about the plan and its potential and brought it to the attention of Diệm.⁴²

Cung’s personal history encapsulates the complexities of life in post-colonial Vietnam. At the outbreak of World War II Cung had been a lieutenant in the French Army. Following the French surrender he resigned his commission. In June 1945 he became the director of police and security for Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn under the pro-Japanese government of Trần

⁴¹ Re-establishing civil administration in liberated areas of Central Vietnam, ND, SF 54–58, Box 1, RG 469, NARA. The Foreign Operations Administration was the forerunner to the International Cooperation Administration.

⁴² Edward Geary Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars: An American’s Mission to Southeast Asia* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 206–210.

Trọng Kim. After the war he joined the Việt Minh as a nationalist. When the French returned in 1946 Cung became the leader of a resistance unit that opposed them. By 1951 he had attained the rank of Brigadier General within the resistance forces, but refused to join the communist party. This refusal bred suspicion and he was ultimately placed on a list of noncommunists to be purged. Catching wind of this, Cung deserted from his command located near the border with China and managed to escape with his family. Over the following year he and his family slowly made their way southward evading both the French and the Việt Minh, using forged papers that identified him as a peasant farmer. Between 1952 and 1954 he and his family remained underground in a Mekong Delta village where his wife had relatives. With the end of the Franco-Việt Minh War, Cung emerged from hiding and, impressed with Diệm's nationalism, offered to assist the new government in reasserting its control over the countryside.⁴³

Cung's ideas, experience with the Việt Minh and his loyalty as a nationalist certainly made him an appealing candidate to orchestrate the Diệm government's effort to reach out to the countryside. But despite all this experience he proved to need some guidance in formulating a feasible plan. The initial approach he devised for the government was so broad and affected so many different ministries that Diệm asked Trần Trung Dung, Secretary of State to the Presidency and later Minister of Defense, to take over and use Cung as his assistant. Together they incorporated ideas from Lansdale's experiences in the Philippines and American economic and information officers in Sài Gòn into a more modest program that would accelerate central government assistance to regional and provincial officials and help counter communist influence over the villages. This plan, viewed as a temporary expedient, essentially attempted to place the resources of the South Vietnamese state behind an effort to duplicate the tactics of the communist agents at the village level and beat them at their own game.⁴⁴ It called for the creation of a flexible, mobile

⁴³ Civic Action, ND, SF 54-58, Box 1, RG 469, NARA (most likely written after November 7, 1955 and no later than January 31, 1956); Phillips, "Before We Lost in South Vietnam," 20-21; Phillips, *Why Vietnam Matters*, 76; Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars*, 207-210; Memorandum from D.C. Lavergne to Leland Barrows, November 28, 1955 SF 54-58, Box 1, RG 469, NARA; and Fishel, *Anatomy of a Conflict*, 597.

⁴⁴ Civic Action, ND, SF 54-58, Box 1, RG 469, NARA; Ahern, *CIA and Rural Pacification in South Vietnam*, 8-9; and Phillips, *Why Vietnam Matters*, 74-75. For comparisons with Việt Minh techniques see Civic Action: Role, Activities, Results, ND, SF 54-58, Box 1, RG 469, NARA; and Memorandum from D.C. Lavergne to Leland Barrows, December 3, 1955, SF 54-58, Box 1, RG 469, NARA.

civilian organization drawn from the existing pool of civil servants that would go out into the countryside and fill the vacuum that was present between the central government ministries and the village population.⁴⁵

The activities of this mobile organization, as envisioned by its creators, would be coordinated by commissars serving alongside their governmental counterparts at the regional, district, and provincial levels, but under the authority and control of a Commissioner General. This parallel structure, it was hoped, would facilitate relations between the local authorities and the central government by promoting greater cooperation and mediating conflicts that might arise between the members of the mobile organization and the regional, provincial or district governments.⁴⁶ The mobile groups would establish a grassroots connection with the people by living and working alongside villagers to recruit local cadres and guide them in carrying out useful local projects to improve their overall welfare, something the GAMs had failed to do.⁴⁷ As we shall see, the concept of harnessing local human resources to a self-help effort was quite consistent with ideas underpinning a broad rural development movement that was circulating throughout the Third World known as community development.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Huấn Lệnh Tổng Quất Tạm Thời Về Công Dân Vụ [Temporary Comprehensive Directions for Civic Action], March 7, 1955, Folder 1463, PTTĐỊCH; Untitled Document justifying Civic Action, ND, Folder 38, PTTCP, TTLTQG2; Report on the Organization of the Special Commissariat for Civic Action, June 1957, Folder 82, Box 660, MSUVAG, MSUA; Civic Activities of the Military, Southeast Asia, March 13, 1959, Item number 12050107012, TTVVA (accessed January 29, 2007); and Civic Action, ND, SF 54–58, Box 1, RG 469, NARA.

⁴⁶ Report on the Project No. 2 on the creation and organization of the Commissionship of Civic Action, ND, SF 54–58, Box 1, RG 469, NARA.

⁴⁷ Untitled Document justifying Civic Action, ND, Folder 38, PTTCP, TTLTQG2; Report on the Organization of the Special Commissariat for Civic Action, June 1957, Folder 82, Box 660, MSUVAG, MSUA; Civic Activities of the Military, Southeast Asia, March 13, 1959, Item number 12050107012, TTVVA (accessed January 29, 2007); Report on the Project No. 2 on the creation and organization of the Commissionship of Civic Action, ND; and Civic Action, January 31, 1956; SF 54–58, Box 1, RG 469, NARA.

⁴⁸ Community development, which shall be discussed in greater detail in the following chapters, was an American-inspired initiative that had its origins in New Deal urban renewal programs. It was adapted to rural conditions in post-independence India where it was held up as a model for other postcolonial states to emulate in their efforts to establish themselves as viable, independent nations. According to the Indian example, a trained community development worker would catalogue the perceived needs of the community, which could include anything from improving village health and sanitation to animal husbandry, and then enlist the voluntary help of its inhabitants in addressing these needs. Lane E. Holdcroft, “The Rise and Fall of Community Development: 1950–1965” (M.Sc. thesis, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI, 1976), 1–3 and 9–16; Nicole Sackey, “Passage to Modernity: American Social Scientists, India, and the Pursuit

The Civic Action program, unfortunately, met with resistance from all sides. At a series of inter-ministerial conferences held throughout January and February, many province chiefs objected to it on the grounds that it would usurp their power, despite arguments to the contrary. As far as they were concerned, they believed the central government should simply provide them with money and allow them to carry out the program as they saw fit.⁴⁹

Interested American observers, such as President Eisenhower's Special Representative to Vietnam, General J. Lawton Collins and his assistant Lieutenant Colonel John E. Dwan, were equally concerned. Though they were encouraged Civic Action's effort to extend the Sài Gòn government's presence down to the village level, they were slightly disturbed by the fact that the American Mission received no advanced word of the new National Action Plan developed by Cung and Dung prior to its hotly contested presentation to the province chiefs.⁵⁰ Moreover, they bristled at the extent of the program's organizational structure, which they perceived to be far too ambitious for the national budget of the State of Vietnam to sustain, while needlessly creating a parallel system of government.⁵¹ Concerned that this duplication of effort could lead to "creation of another ministerial empire," Dwan suggested that the plan be revised so Civic Action would be implemented through the existing government agencies.⁵²

of Development, 1945–61" (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, Princeton, NJ, 2004), 181–183; Francis X. Sutton, "Nation-Building in the Heyday of the Classic Development Ideology: Ford Foundation Experiences in the 1950s and 1960s," in *Nation-Building: Beyond Afghanistan and Iraq*, ed. Francis Fukuyama (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 53–55; Nick Cullather, *The Hungry World: America's Cold War Battle Against Poverty in Asia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 76–83; and Daniel Immerwahr, *Thinking Small: The United States and the Lure of Community Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 71–75.

⁴⁹ Report on the Organization of the Special Commissariat for Civic Action, June 1957, Folder 82, Box 660, MSUVAG, MSUA; Civic Activities of the Military, Southeast Asia, March 13, 1959, Item number 12050107012, TTVVA (accessed January 29, 2007); and Civic Action, ND, SF 54–58, Box 1, RG 469, NARA; and Ahern, *CIA and Rural Pacification in South Vietnam*, 9.

⁵⁰ Memorandum of a Conversation with Ho Thong Minh, March 11, 1955, Memos for Record, Box 29, CP, DDEL.

⁵¹ Civic Action, ND, SF 54–58, Box 1, RG 469, NARA; Memorandum for Collins from John E. Dwan, March 8, 1955, Lansdale, Edward G. (Colonel) 2, Box 28, CP, DDEL; Memorandum of a Conversation with Ho Thong Minh, March 11, 1955, Memos for Record, Box 29, CP, DDEL; and Ahern, *CIA and Rural Pacification in South Vietnam*, 9.

⁵² Memorandum for Collins from John E. Dwan, March 8, 1955, Lansdale, Edward G. (Colonel) 2, Box 28, CP, DDEL.

Undaunted by this lack of overwhelming support for the National Plan, Diệm went ahead and on March 7, 1955 established within the Office of the Prime Minister a provisional Special Commissariat for Civic Action (*Đặc Ủy Phủ Công Dân Vụ* or CDV) with Kiểu Công Cung as its Commissioner General.⁵³ The Special Commissariat consisted of two parts. One was the Central Services, which were responsible for liaising with the relevant ministries and services, drawing up plans and training the cadres for field work. It was originally housed in a temporary headquarters provided by the Ministry of Defense along with furniture, materiel, vehicles, equipment and military recruits on loan as administrative staff. The other part of the CDV was made up of the mobile provincial groups assigned to carry out the work of civic action and win the peasantry over.⁵⁴

The Commissioner General set out immediately to recruit and train candidates for field duty to assist in the ongoing pacification operation following Việt Minh regroupment in the Cà Mau peninsula.⁵⁵ Cung hoped to find his first volunteers in the civil service, most likely assuming that current government employees would exhibit the spirited patriotism such a role warranted. When no volunteers appeared forthcoming he turned to a small group of young, university-trained men who had recently left the north as part of the post-Geneva resettlement.⁵⁶ These initial recruits were rapidly trained in the dissemination of propaganda; communal organization; and proper conduct, which meant dressing in

⁵³ Huấn Lệnh Tổng Quát Tạm Thời Về Công Dân Vụ [Temporary Comprehensive Directions for Civic Action], March 7, 1955, Folder 1463, PTTĐICH; Ordre de Service [Directions for the Service], March 7, 1955, Folder 4065, PTTCP, TTLTQG2; and Civic Action, ND, SF 54–58, Box 1, RG 469, NARA. It is interesting to note, and perhaps this is indicative of the level of active American interest in the internal Vietnamese affairs, that the American document on Civic Action referred to here, along with many subsequent American documents and works to reference Civic Action erroneously state that the Special Commissariat for Civic Action was established on May 7, 1955.

⁵⁴ Draft Copy of a Decree, ND, SF 54–58, Box 1, RG 469, NARA.

⁵⁵ Báo Cáo Hoạt Động Công Dân Vụ từ ngày thành lập đến nay (7.3.1955 đến 30.4.1955) [Report on the Operations of Civic Action from its establishment until the present (March 7, 1955 to April 30, 1955)], May 3, 1955, Folder 29155, PTTCP, TTLTQG2; Civic Activities of the Military, Southeast Asia, March 13, 1959, Item number 12050107012, TTVVA (accessed January 29, 2007); and Civic Action, ND, SF 54–58, Box 1, RG 469, NARA.

⁵⁶ Civic Activities of the Military, Southeast Asia, March 13, 1959, Item number 12050107012, TTVVA (accessed January 29, 2007). See also Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars*, 210–213.

the “calico noir” of the farmers and laborers and helping the people in their daily activities.⁵⁷

Despite the rapid training of this first group of Civic Action cadres, the Cà Mau operation never materialized. The Prime Minister’s Office did not deem the political situation in the region “favorable,” most likely because of the threat the entrenched presence of “stay behind” elements posed to the security of the newly minted CDV cadres. The first group of cadres was instead deployed on April 15, 1955 to the province of Gia Định, which surrounded Sài Gòn, followed subsequently by groups dispatched to Bình Định and Biên Hòa provinces on completion of their training.⁵⁸

These initial deployments became part of a three-month pilot project intended to gain practical experience in coordinating the activities of the various ministries for subsequent CDV teams.⁵⁹ Their work consisted mainly of demonstrating the government’s interest in the well-being of its citizens. Such tasks included providing gifts from the government for the people, establishing information rooms in the villages in order to propagandize on the behalf of the government, investigating the political allegiances of the various rural communities, and distributing desperately needed medicine and medical equipment from the Ministry of Health.⁶⁰

Over the next six weeks, the CDV continued to expand and by the beginning of June, 117 cadres had been trained. Of these new cadres, 100 were divided evenly into ten mobile groups, while the remaining seventeen were given staff and supervisory roles in the Central Services. As the number of CDV cadres began to grow, it became readily apparent that

⁵⁷ Báo Cáo Hoạt Động Công Dân Vụ từ ngày thành lập đến nay (7.3.1955 đến 30.4.1955) [Report on the Operations of Civic Action from its establishment until the present (March 7, 1955 to April 30, 1955)], May 3, 1955, Folder 29155, PTTCP, TTLTQG2; Civic Activities of the Military, Southeast Asia, March 13, 1959, Item number 12050107012, TTVVA (accessed January 29, 2007); and Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars*, 210–213.

⁵⁸ Báo Cáo Hoạt Động Công Dân Vụ từ ngày thành lập đến nay (7.3.1955 đến 30.4.1955) [Report on the Operations of Civic Action from its establishment until the present (March 7, 1955 to April 30, 1955)], May 3, 1955, Folder 29155, PTTCP, TTLTQG2.

⁵⁹ Báo Cáo Hoạt Động tháng 5, 1955 [May 1955 Operation Report], June 9, 1955; Báo Cáo Hoạt Động tháng 6 [June 1955 Operation Report], July 12, 1955; and Báo Cáo Hoạt Động tháng 7 1955 [July 1955 Operation Report], August 8, 1955, Folder 29155, PTTCP, TTLTQG2.

⁶⁰ Báo Cáo Hoạt Động Công Dân Vụ từ ngày thành lập đến nay (7.3.1955 đến 30.4.1955) [Report on the Operations of Civic Action from its establishment until the present (March 7, 1955 to April 30, 1955)], May 3, 1955; and Báo Cáo Hoạt Động tháng 5, 1955 [May 1955 Operation Report], June 9, 1955, Folder 29155, PTTCP, TTLTQG2. For an American account of the early stages of the Civic Action program see Phillips, “Before We Lost in South Vietnam,” 21–22.

it would need a larger infrastructure to manage its constituent elements more efficiently. In the Central Services, Civic Action staff attempted to coordinate their work with representatives from the Ministries of Information and Propaganda, Education, Youth and Social Action, and Health. These ministries sent some of their own specialized cadres to join the CDV cadres in the villages.⁶¹

While a Vietnamese organization in design and execution, the Special Commissariat for Civic Action did receive some initial support from American sources. Lansdale provided valuable input to Cung regarding how the program should be conceived and obtained some additional “seed money” for training cadres from the Central Intelligence Agency.⁶² At the same time, the Central Services liaised with the American-directed Training Relations and Instruction Mission (TRIM), USOM, the United States Information Service (USIS), and CARE (the Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere) in order to keep them informed of their work and obtain whatever financial and material support they could.⁶³ Rufus Phillips was assigned by Lansdale to facilitate this process. According to Phillips, USIS was very cooperative, loaning movie projectors to the Civic Action teams and helping them train projectionists. USOM, however, was far less amenable. USOM officials bristled at what they saw as the program’s potential for a wasteful duplication of effort. They were far more interested in working directly with existing Vietnamese ministries in Sài Gòn.⁶⁴

Where Phillips did have a more positive impact was in training the Civic Action cadres. A protégé of Lansdale, Phillips was well-versed in what he and Lansdale called “military civic action” – ensuring that members of the military adhered to an ethical code of conduct with regard to their relations with the civilian population using the armed forces to carry out activities that would contribute to the people’s overall well-being, such as distributing blankets and mosquito nets or using army

⁶¹ Báo Cáo Hoạt Động tháng 5, 1955 [May 1955 Operation Report], June 9, 1955, Folder 29155, PTTCP, TTLTQG2.

⁶² Phillips, “Before We Lost in South Vietnam,” 21.

⁶³ Báo Cáo Hoạt Động tháng 5, 1955 [May 1955 Operation Report], June 9, 1955, Folder 29155, PTTCP, TTLTQG2.

⁶⁴ Phillips, *Why Vietnam Matters*, 76–77; Civic Action, ND, SF 54–58, Box 1, RG 469, NARA; Memorandum for Collins from John E. Dwan, March 8, 1955, Lansdale, Edward G. (Colonel) 2, Box 28, CP, DDEL; and Memorandum of a Conversation with Ho Thong Minh, March 11, 1955, Memos for Record, Box 29, CP, DDEL. According to Thomas Ahern, Lansdale would later persuade “USIS to commit three-fourths of its operating budget to support the civic action program’s public information efforts.” Ahern, *CIA and Rural Pacification in South Vietnam*, 14.

engineers to repair bridges and roads. Phillips had accompanied the South Vietnamese Army to help in this capacity during the reoccupation of the Việt Minh regroupment zones.⁶⁵ With these experiences in hand, Phillips personally assisted Cung in establishing a training and operations program for the cadres.⁶⁶ More specific training involved instruction by specialists from the Ministries of Information and Propaganda, National Education, Youth and Social Action, and law enforcement from the Ministry of Interior to educate the cadres about the tasks of their respective sphere. The ideological aspect of this training was designed to mimic that of the communist cadres. Each member of the team was “instructed in the major political lines of the government” – such as Diệm’s views on communism, colonialism and an independent Vietnam – and how to “cope with the subversive maneuvers of the adversary.”⁶⁷

Given the limited budget for the program and the perceived demand for cadres to act in the field (initial estimates put the need at 6,340 people) they could only afford to be trained for two-week terms. To help ease the burden the Ministry of Defense provided the CDV with an additional and much larger building at Tân Sơn Nhứt airport to serve as both a headquarters and a new cadre training school. With this new school they anticipated being able to train anywhere from 300 to 400 students every two weeks, but contended that to be really effective they should be increasing the number of training classes to be able to start one each week.⁶⁸

The evolution of the Central Services allowed the Commissariat to more clearly define the cadres’ roles and responsibilities in the field. At

⁶⁵ Phillips, *Why Vietnam Matters*, 26–27, and 40–50; Thomas L. Ahern, Jr., *CIA and the House of Ngo* (Langley, VA: Center for the Study of Intelligence, declassified 2009), 61–65; and Ahern, *CIA and Rural Pacification in South Vietnam*, 5–6.

⁶⁶ Phillips, “Before We Lost in South Vietnam,” 21.

⁶⁷ The quotation is from Civic Action: Role, Activities, Results, ND, SF 54–58, Box 1, RG 469, NARA. See also Critical Note and Proposals, ND; and Civic Action, ND, SF 54–58, Box 1, RG 469, NARA. Unfortunately we do not have any evidence of what message the cadres were to convey to the peasantry. We can surmise from the language of many Civic Action reports that they involved denouncing the communist line as traitorous while lauding the Diệm regime as humane and attentive to the people’s welfare. See for example Báo Cáo Hoạt Động tháng 6 [June 1955 Operation Report], July 12, 1955; and Báo Cáo Hoạt Động tháng 7, 1955 [July 1955 Operation Report], August 8, 1955, Folder 29155, PTTCP, TTLTQG2; Báo Cáo Hàng Tháng: Tháng 11 năm 1955 của Đặc Ủy Phụ Công Dân Vụ [Monthly Report: November 1955 of the Special Commissariat for Civic Action], December 12, 1955; and Báo Cáo Hoạt Động Công Dân Vụ trong năm 1955 [1955 Operation Report], January 21, 1956, Folder 15982, PTTĐỊCH, TTLTQG2.

⁶⁸ Báo Cáo Hoạt Động tháng 5, 1955 [May 1955 Operation Report], June 9, 1955, Folder 29155, PTTCP, TTLTQG2.

the village level, they were operationally responsible to the province chief and instructed to get close to the community in order to gain their trust: living, eating, sleeping and working alongside the peasantry in the fields when necessary during the harvest season. Initially their efforts remained focused on demonstrating the government's benevolence. This continued to take the form of dispensing gifts, medical supplies and political tracts. Over time, the responsibilities were broadened to holding popular education classes, explaining the mission of the government ministries and how they could help the village population, and re-establishing administrative councils in areas that had been abandoned by the Việt Minh.

As part of their role, the Civic Action cadres were expected to ensure each village had a primary school, village hall for the village council to meet, a medical dispensary and information rooms where news and information about the government and its programs and policies would be available for members of the community to access easily. Where such facilities were unavailable, one of the cadres' first orders of business was to construct them with local materials and whatever volunteers were forthcoming.⁶⁹ Additionally, the cadres were also expected to bring a measure of security and order to the villages by convincing the community to accept some responsibility for its own self-defense and, more ominously, investigating the political allegiance of individual village members and their families and reporting on the activities of suspected communist agents or other dissident elements.⁷⁰ All of this was aimed to make the people realize that the leadership in Sài Gòn was attentive to their needs, with the hope that, when compared to the clandestine efforts of the communists, they would see that the new government in Sài Gòn was genuinely concerned about their interests.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Civic Action, ND, SF 54–58, Box 1, RG 469, NARA; Báo Cáo Hoạt Động tháng 5, 1955 [May 1955 Operation Report], June 9, 1955; and Báo Cáo Hoạt Động tháng 6 [June 1955 Operation Report], July 12, 1955, Folder 29155, PTTCP, TTLTQG2; and Memorandum for the Record, July 15, 1958, Item number 2321726007, TTVVA (accessed January 29, 2007).

⁷⁰ Civic Action, ND, SF 54–58, Box 1, RG 469, NARA; Báo Cáo Hoạt Động tháng 5, 1955 [May 1955 Operation Report], June 9, 1955; and Báo Cáo Hoạt Động tháng 8, 1955 [August 1955 Operation Report], September 14, 1955, Folder 29155, PTTCP, TTLTQG2.

⁷¹ See for example Báo Cáo Hoạt Động tháng 5, 1955 [May 1955 Operation Report], June 9, 1955; and Báo Cáo Hoạt Động tháng 6, 1955 [June 1955 Operation Report], July 12, 1955 Folder 29155, PTTCP, TTLTQG2.

EARLY ASSESSMENTS

The first reports on the work of Civic Action were quite optimistic about the potential of the program. They offered an upbeat picture of measured success, contending that while the cadres were received with initial suspicion by the villagers, after realizing the nature of the mission they quickly warmed to the cadres' presence.⁷² In each village the cadres passed through they made the people realize that the government was concerned with their welfare and sincerely looking for ways to help them.⁷³ According to one report, the people began to realize that they were being "exploited" by "the cunning propaganda of the Việt Minh" that claimed the Sài Gòn government was ineffective.⁷⁴ In some cases, the cadres' actions instilled new confidence in the national government, encouraging the members of the village councils in their jobs and injecting new life into the local authorities.⁷⁵

Despite these buoyant reports there were some fundamental weaknesses that needed to be addressed for the program to demonstrate any lasting success. First, the cadres were still very inexperienced. As the program was new, they had very little practical experience to draw upon in their training; consequently, much of what they learned was theoretical. Second, a lack of the financial and material means to recruit, train and employ cadres on the scale they envisioned severely limited the scope of the program.⁷⁶ Third, most of the cadres recruited were from the north of

⁷² Báo Cáo tổng quát về hoạt động của Công Dân Vụ từ ngày thành lập đến ngày nay [Comprehensive report about the operations of Civic Action from its establishment until the present], June 20, 1955; Báo Cáo Hoạt Động tháng 5, 1955 [May 1955 Operation Report], June 9, 1955; Báo Cáo Hoạt Động tháng 7, 1955 [July 1955 Operation Report], August 8, 1955; and Báo Cáo Hoạt Động tháng 8, 1955 [August 1955 Operation Report], September 14, 1955, Folder 29155, PTTCP, TTLTQG2.

⁷³ Kính gửi Bộ Phủ Tổng Thống [Memorandum from the Special Commissariat for Civic Action to the Office of the President], June 4, 1955, Folder 29155, PTTCP, TTLTQG2.

⁷⁴ The quotations are taken from Báo Cáo Hoạt Động tháng 7, 1955 [July 1955 Operation Report], August 8, 1955, Folder 29155. The government's perspective on the substance of communist propaganda appears in Thuyết Trình về dự án sắc lệnh thiết lập Phủ Đặc Ủy Công Dân Vụ [Report on the decree establishing the Special Commissariat for Civic Action], September 24, 1955, Folder 1463, PTTCP, TTLTQG2.

⁷⁵ Memorandum from John Gates, TRIM to Edward G. Lansdale, August 7, 1956, SF 54-58, Box 1, RG 469, NARA; and Báo Cáo Hoạt Động tháng 5 [May 1955 Operation Report], 1955, June 9, 1955, Folder 29155, PTTCP, TTLTQG2.

⁷⁶ Báo Cáo tổng quát về hoạt động của Công Dân Vụ từ ngày thành lập đến ngày nay [Comprehensive report about the operations of Civic Action from its establishment until the present], June 20, 1955; Báo Cáo Hoạt Động tháng 7, 1955 [July 1955 Operation Report], August 8, 1955; and Báo Cáo Hoạt Động tháng 8, 1955 [August 1955 Operation Report], September 14, 1955, Folder 29155, PTTCP, TTLTQG2.

Vietnam and possessed dialects, accents and mores that were unfamiliar to the population in the south, making the communication and transmission of ideas difficult.⁷⁷ Finally, power struggles and disagreements between some regional authorities and their Civic Action counterparts over the course of action remained a hindrance to cooperation in areas where cadres were active.⁷⁸ In many cases, the local officials still resented having to share some of their authority with outsiders sent down from Sài Gòn and viewed the Civic Action cadres with suspicion.⁷⁹ According to one report, provincial authorities refused to recognize Civic Action personnel as government representatives due to their “plebian dress.” It was not until Cung himself dressed in the same manner and toured the provinces as “a high functionary close to” Diệm that the program began to gain some acceptance.⁸⁰

These clashes were most likely the result of the greater autonomy Vietnamese officials had received in running the country just prior to the departure of the French. Throughout the colonial period a glass ceiling had existed for the Vietnamese members of the colonial apparatus. These officials were denied posts as administrators in Sài Gòn and permitted only to rise as high as district chief within the provincial governing system. As Roy Jumper observes, that began to change during the French-Indochina War, when Vietnamese officials were finally “promoted

⁷⁷ Civic Activities of the Military, Southeast Asia, March 13, 1959, Item number 12050107012, TTVVA (accessed January 29, 2007); David W.P. Elliott, *The Vietnamese War: Revolution and Social Change in the Mekong Delta, 1930–1975*, Vol. 1 (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2003), 188; and Phillips, *Why Vietnam Matters*, 79. Though no specific examples of these difficulties were cited in the reports for this initial period of Civic Action, representative examples may be found in Tỉnh Trưởng Bến Tre Kính gửi Ông Bộ Trưởng tại Phủ Tổng Thống [Memorandum from the Ben Tre Province Chief to the Secretary of State for the Office of the President], August 18, 1956; and Tỉnh Trưởng Tân An Kính gửi Ông Bộ Trưởng tại Phủ Tổng Thống [Memorandum from the Tanan Province Chief to the Secretary of State for the Office of the President], September 4, 1956, Folder 16065, PTTĐICH, TTLTQG2.

⁷⁸ Báo Cáo tổng quát về hoạt động của Công Dân Vụ từ ngày thành lập đến ngày nay [Comprehensive report about the operations of Civic Action from its establishment until the present], June 20, 1955; Báo Cáo Hoạt Động tháng 7, 1955 [July 1955 Operation Report], August 8, 1955; and Báo Cáo Hoạt Động tháng 8, 1955 [August 1955 Operation Report], September 14, 1955, Folder 29155, PTTCP, TTLTQG2.

⁷⁹ Báo Cáo Hoạt Động tháng 6, 1955 [June 1955 Operation Report], July 12, 1955; and Báo Cáo Hoạt Động tháng 7, 1955 [July 1955 Operation Report], August 8, 1955, Folder 29155, PTTCP, TTLTQG2.

⁸⁰ See Civic Activities of the Military, Southeast Asia, March 13, 1959, Item number 12050107012, TTVVA (accessed January 29, 2007). See also Civic Action, ND, SF 54–58, Box 1, RG 469, NARA for a corroborating account of this report.

to the top rungs of the administrative ladder.”⁸¹ Vietnamese officials who replaced the retreating French were able to enjoy much of the same autonomy and power that the *Administrateurs* had before them.⁸²

Unfortunately, they were also the products of a system that stifled initiative, exhibiting the *fonctionnaire* spirit Diệm so derided. Rather than be perceived as a system for governance, administration was primarily viewed as a means for “ensuring accountability of bureaucratic transactions and the control of both government officials and the subject population.”⁸³ As Diệm saw it, the bureaucracy was filled with “automatons” who were “slaves of routine.” Civic Action offered him a means to inject it with a new vitality. Naturally, such moves encountered resistance as they threatened the status quo.⁸⁴ Ironically, Diệm contributed directly to this problem. In order to quell the “storm of protest” that had initially greeted the program when it was introduced in early 1955, Diệm had compromised and placed the Civic Action teams under provincial jurisdiction. This meant that many of the “working-level supervisors” who were holdovers from the system Diệm inherited from the French retained authority over the Civic Action cadres despite the fact that the “ineffectiveness” of these functionaries was something the CDV teams were intended to “circumvent.”⁸⁵ In such a tense environment, Diệm’s efforts to enlist the help of the various ministries and regional authorities in facilitating the work of Civic Action only served to further threaten these individuals who were already on the defensive; and they sought to protect their turf.⁸⁶

Many of these underlying problems were discussed in a May 20, 1955 report of a recent trip to a village in Biên Hòa province by Randall Frakes, a Field Representative with USOM stationed in the Mekong Delta city of Cần Thơ. Although he saw great potential in the program as a means to reach many villages in a minimum period of time, Frakes contended that there had been little cooperation provided by the various government ministries and noted the “problem of duplication of effort.” According

⁸¹ Roy Jumper, “Mandarin Bureaucracy and Politics in South Viet Nam,” *Pacific Affairs* 30(1) (March 1957): 47.

⁸² Edward Garvey Miller, “Grand Designs: Vision, Power and Nation Building in America’s Alliance with Ngo Dinh Diem, 1954–1960,” Ph.D. diss. (Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, 2004), 244–245.

⁸³ Scigliano, *Nation Under Stress*, 38.

⁸⁴ Jumper, “Mandarin Bureaucracy and Politics,” 53; and John C. Donnell, “National Renovation Campaigns in Vietnam,” *Pacific Affairs* 32(1) (March 1959): 74–75.

⁸⁵ Ahern, *CIA and Rural Pacification in South Vietnam*, 9.

⁸⁶ Scigliano, *Nation Under Stress*, 39.

to his report, the Civic Action cadres had established a dispensary and begun training a first-aid worker, but the village already had a fully trained first-aid worker along with a complete first aid kit. He also did not feel qualified personnel could be trained within the fifteen days the cadres were in the village to be able to continue the teaching and health work. More generally, he felt it would be very difficult for the CDV to be able to obtain enough qualified volunteers to fill the anticipated number of Civic Action teams, which he stated to be 100. Finally, he doubted that there would be enough funds or equipment available to pay their salaries and carry out the proposed activities once the cadres moved on.⁸⁷

Frakes' final observation proved to be the most enduring problem of the Civic Action program: maintaining continuity in the areas where the cadres had been active. As the USOM Field Representative observed, cadres were only assigned to villages for two- to four-week periods. One of the most pressing concerns was the training of appropriate individuals at the village level to serve as regional cadres who would continue the work of the Civic Action mobile group once it had moved on.⁸⁸ These individuals were selected for their enthusiasm and devotion to the national cause and were rewarded with minor seats on the village councils and exemption from local taxes. They were trained through oral instruction, the use of printed texts, and by working closely with the Civic Action cadres prior to their departure. Civic Action cadres would return periodically to check on the progress being made in their absence. Despite this backing, the perks and the training, these regional cadres were ostensibly volunteers and, in order to be willing to serve the Sài Gòn regime, they needed to be instilled with a sense of "self-sacrifice" that would ultimately require an iron faith in the benevolence of the government and its ability to lead.⁸⁹

This proved to be a formidable task. In some areas where the cadres had managed to get close to the peasants and earn their trust, they found their efforts to maintain this bond were hampered by a chronic shortage of resources and a lack of trained personnel.⁹⁰ In a number of other places that had formerly been under Việt Minh control, the cadres found

⁸⁷ Memorandum from Randall V. Frakes to M.H.B. Adler, Chief, Field Service USOM, May 20, 1955, SF 54-58, Box 2, RG 469, NARA.

⁸⁸ Báo Cáo Hoạt Động tháng 6, 1955 [June 1955 Operation Report], July 12, 1955, Folder 29155, PTTCP, TTLTQG2.

⁸⁹ Báo Cáo Hoạt Động tháng 5, 1955 [May 1955 Operation Report], June 9, 1955; Báo Cáo Hoạt Động tháng 7, 1955 [July 1955 Operation Report], August 8, 1955, Folder 29155, PTTCP, TTLTQG2; and Civic Action, ND, SF 54-58, Box 1, RG 469, NARA.

⁹⁰ Báo Cáo Hoạt Động tháng 6 [June 1955 Operation Report], 1955, July 12, 1955; Báo Cáo Hoạt Động tháng 7, 1955 [July 1955 Operation Report], August 8, 1955; and Báo

very little support. The local administration was either nonexistent, or still in exile. The communist members of the Việt Minh who remained behind still managed to wield enough influence to effectively prevent the Civic Action cadres from establishing any meaningful government presence amongst the population.⁹¹ Compounding this was the fact that despite the efforts of the Civic Action cadres Diệm, for the most part, remained an unproven commodity to much of the peasantry. Members of the rural population looking for some semblance of stability in their lives and hoping for a better future were hesitant to throw their support behind the South Vietnamese premier, as he had yet to demonstrate that he was capable of providing for their needs. The communists, on the other hand, had already proven their nationalist mettle as members of the Việt Minh and could point to having defeated the French as evidence of what they were capable of.⁹² For Civic Action to succeed and show the people of South Vietnam that they had more to gain by supporting the Sài Gòn government than Hồ Chí Minh in Hà Nội before the 1956 elections it was imperative that it overcome the shortcomings that emerged in these early assessments.

Cáo Hoạt Động tháng 8, 1955 [August 1955 Operation Report], September 14, 1955, Folder 29155, PTTCP, TTLTQG2.

⁹¹ Báo Cáo Hoạt Động tháng 6, 1955 [June 1955 Operation Report], July 12, 1955; and Báo Cáo Hoạt Động tháng 7, 1955 [July 1955 Operation Report], August 8, 1955, Folder 29155, PTTCP, TTLTQG2.

⁹² Douglas Pike, *Viet Cong: The Organization and Techniques of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1967), 58–59, 75–76 and 83.