As if we'd never really been there? Pacification in Phuoc Tuy province, Republic of Vietnam, 1966-1972.

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There is a growing view in the historiography of Australia's war in Vietnam that 1 Australian Task Force (1ATF) succeeded in defeating the Communist insurgency within Phuoc Tuy, the province in which the Task Force was based, by time it withdrew from Vietnam at the end of 1971. This belief comes against a backdrop of a historiography of pacification that is dominated by works looking to win doctrinal battles within the US military. By examining the conduct of pacification in Phuoc Tuy between 1966 and 1972, this thesis challenges both these perspectives. A detailed case study of a single province puts both the operations of 1ATF in a wider context, and allows pacification to be examined on its own terms rather than through the prism of contemporary counterinsurgency. By focusing on a single province, this thesis is also able to examine the political, economic and military aspects of pacification and how they influenced one another, rather than focusing on a single program or aspect.

By taking this view, this thesis is able to examine how successful pacification was in Phuoc Tuy. Despite a flawed conception and frequent mismanagement, pacification did begin to change Phuoc Tuy's political and economic structure and succeeded in eroding the power of the Communist insurgency. Yet ultimately pacification could not overcome the weaknesses inherent in the South Vietnamese government. Equally while 1ATF achieved some success in operations in Phuoc Tuy, it did not have the ability to solve the political problems underpinning the insurgency. Although it was weakened, the Communist insurgency survived. Pacification did not succeed in Phuoc Tuy.

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As if we'd never really been there?

Pacification in Phuoc Tuy Province, Republic of Vietnam, 1966-1972

Thomas Richardson

A thesis in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

School of Humanities and Social Sciences
UNSW Canberra

July 2014

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Finally, Jules: I couldn't have done it without you.

Glossary

1ACAU	1st Australian Civil Affairs Unit
1ATF	1st Australian Task Force
1RAR	1st Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment
2RAR	2nd Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment
3RAR	3rd Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment
5RAR	5th Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment
6RAR	6th Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment
7RAR	7th Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment
8RAR	8th Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment
9RAR	9th Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment
A&L	Administration and Logistics
AAR	After Action Report
AATTV	Australian Army Training Team Vietnam
ACDC	Anti-Communist Denunciation Campaign
ACR	11th Armoured Cavalry Regiment
AFV	Australian Forces Vietnam
ANZAC	Australian New Zealand Army Corps
APC	Armoured Personnel Carriers
APC	Accelerated Pacification Campaign
ARVN	Army of the Republic of Vietnam
BRIAM	British Advisory Mission
C&S	Cordon and Searches
CATG	Chinese Agricultural Technical Group
CDEC	Captured Document Exportation Centre
CEFEO	French Far East Expeditionary Corps
CG	Commanding General
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
COIN	Counter Insurgency

COMAFV	Commander Australian Forces Vietnam
CORDS	Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support
COSVN	Central Office for South Vietnam
CRW	Counter Revolutionary Warfare
CTZ	Corps Tactical Zone
DEPCORDS	Deputy to COMUSMACV for CORDS
DIOCC	District Intelligence and Operations Coordinating Centre
DMI	Directorate of Military Intelligence
DPSA	Deputy Province Senior Adviser
DRV	Democratic Republic of Vietnam
DSA	District Senior Adviser
DTIC	Defense Technical Information Center
EDCOR	Economic Development Corps
FRUS	Foreign Relations of the United States
FWMAF	Free World Military Assistance Forces
GO-GU	General Offensive – General Uprising
HES	Hamlet Evaluation System
ICEX	Intelligence Collection and Exploitation Staff
ICP	Indochinese Communist Party
IIFFV	2nd Field Force Vietnam
IRRI	International Rice Research Institute
JCS	Joint Chiefs of Staff
LOC	Lines of Communication
LTTT	Land to the Tiller
MAAG	Military Assistance Advisory Group
MACV	Military Assistance Command Vietnam
MAT	Mobile Advisory Teams
MATT	Mobile Advisory Training Team
MEDCAPs	Medical Civil Affairs Program
MIT	Massachusetts Institute of Technology
MSWR	Ministry for Social Welfare and Refugees

NCO	Non-Commissioned Officers
NFLSVN or NLF	National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam
NPFF	National Police Field Force
NVA	North Vietnamese Army
OCO	Office of Civil Operations
ORLL	Operational Lessons Learned
PAT	People's Action Teams
PAVN	People's Army of Vietnam
PCS	Party Chapter Secretary
PLAF	People's Liberation Armed Forces
PRC	People's Republic of China
PRU	Provincial Reconnaissance Unit
PSA	Province Senior Adviser
PSB	Police Special Branch
PSDF	People's Self-Defence Force
RAE	Royal Australian Engineer
RAR	Royal Australian Regiment
RD	Revolutionary Development
RDC	Revolutionary Development Cadre
RF/PF	Regional Forces/Popular Forces
RVN or GVN	Republic of Vietnam/Government of Vietnam
RVNAF	Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces
SAS	Australian Special Air Service
SIPH	*Societe Indochinoise de Plantation d'Heveas*
SVN	South Vietnam
TAOR	Tactical Area of Responsibility
TOC	Tactical Operations Centre
TVA	Tennessee Valley Authority
US	United States of America
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
USIS	United States Information Service
USOIDP	United States Overseas Internal Defense Policy

USOM	United States Overseas Mission
VC	Viet Cong
VCI	Viet Cong Infrastructure
VIS	Vietnamese Information Service
VSD	Village Self-Development
VVA	Virtual Vietnam Archive
VWP	Vietnamese Workers Party

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Chapter 1. Introduction

This thesis explores the conduct of 'pacification' in the Republic of Vietnam's Phuoc Tuy province between 1966 and 1972. In this context the term pacification refers to the effort made by both the Republic of Vietnam (RVN), and external 'Free World' allies such as the US and Australia, to defeat the Communist-led National Liberation Front (NLF) insurgency within the Republic's borders. While no single comprehensive definition of pacification existed during the Vietnam War, by 1965-66 a broad consensus had emerged among relevant parties around the meaning of the term. To these actors and agencies the term referred to a process designed to win the allegiance of the populace to the government of the Republic through not only military action but also political, economic and social reform.[1] This belief in the need to re-shape society to defeat the insurgency stemmed not just from the particular conditions present in Vietnam, but also from wider American engagement with decolonisation in the wake of the Second World War. It is partly as a result of this key context that this thesis uses pacification rather than contemporary synonyms such as 'counter-revolutionary warfare' (CRW) or 'counterinsurgency' (COIN). Unlike those expressions, pacification is not a generic term; it locates its subject in a particular time and place.[2]

Many important post war commentators, most notably Colonel Harry Summers in his 1986 work *On Strategy*, argued that the major threat to the Republic came not from the insurgency but the Democratic Republic of Vietnam's (DRV) army – rendering scholarly and historical investigation of the pacification process all but irrelevant.[3] This view is, however, misguided.

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[1] Richard Hunt, *Pacification,* Westview Press, Boulder, 1995, p. 1. For a longer contemporary definition see *Handbook for Military Support of Pacification,* Headquarters MACV, San Francisco, 1968, p. 1.
[2] *Pentagon Papers,* Part IV C-8, p. 43.
[3] Harry Summers, *On Strategy: a critical analysis of the Vietnam War*, Presidio Press, Novato, CA., 1982, p. 76. See also Dale Andrade, 'Westmoreland Was Right: learning the wrong lessons from the Vietnam War', *Small Wars and Insurgencies,* Vol. 19, No. 2, 2008, pp. 146-147.

Throughout the war American policymakers, soldiers and diplomats consistently stressed the importance of pacification in achieving their goal of creating an independent and stable Republic of Vietnam. From 1965 onwards the commander of US forces in the RVN, General William Westmoreland, made it clear that the aim of US operations was not simply to defeat the enemy on the battlefield but to create the conditions in which pacification could take place.[4] Speaking in February 1966, US Ambassador to the RVN Henry Lodge, summarised the conclusions of many policymakers and military practitioners when he declared:

> We can beat up North Vietnamese regiments in the high plateau for the next twenty years and it will not end the war – unless we and the Vietnamese are able to build simple but solid political institutions under which a proper police can function and a climate created in which economic and social revolution, in freedom, are possible.[5]

Lodge, Westmoreland and other US leaders understood that the RVN's long-term survival could not depend on US military power but rather on the stable, indigenous government that it was hoped pacification would produce.

Yet despite the importance of pacification, comparatively little of the Vietnam War's sprawling historiography has been devoted to chronicling or examining the program. Richard Hunt's 1995 *Pacification* provides something of a general overview but is primarily concerned with the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) command, set up in 1967 to coordinate US advisory support for pacification. Thomas Ahern's declassified Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) official history, *CIA and Rural Pacification,* edited and commercially published in 2010 as *Vietnam Declassified,* serves a similar function by chronicling the Agency's considerable involvement in pacification.[6] Other areas of focus have been on particular parts of the

[4] MACV Directive 525-4, 17 September 1965, subject: Tactics and Techniques for Employment of US Forces in the Republic of Vietnam, Westmoreland History files, 29 Aug-24 Oct 1965, US Army CMH, reproduced in John Carland, 'Winning the War in Vietnam: Westmoreland's Approach in Two Documents', *The Journal of Military History,* Vol. 68, No. 2, 2004, 557-558.
[5] *Pentagon Papers* Vol. IV C-8, p. 36.
[6] Richard Hunt, *Pacification,* Westview Press, Boulder, 1995. Thomas Ahern, *Vietnam Declassified: The CIA and Counterinsurgency,* The University Press of Kentucky, 2010.

pacification effort – notably the Phoenix/Phung Hoang program – and the memoirs of participants, ranging from CIA officer and CORDS head William Colby to American advisers at district and province level.[7] Although often excellent works on their own terms, as a body of work they fall far short of the kind of the exhaustive or even adequate coverage provided of other aspects of the war.

Moreover, much writing purporting to be about pacification is in reality about the performance of the US Army in Vietnam – often with the objective of winning contemporary doctrinal battles rather than establishing historical truth.[8] During the war and after a number of officers were vocal in their view that the Army did not understand the nature of the war in Vietnam and that this had been a significant factor in their defeat.[9] In 1986 Andrew Krepinevich gave this view an academic treatment in *The Army and Vietnam*, writing that 'the [US] Army's conduct of the war was a failure, primarily because it never realized that insurgency warfare required basic changes in Army methods to meet the exigencies of this "new" conflict environment.'[10] Krepinevich, a serving officer at the time of publication, made clear that the book was designed to counteract what he perceived to be the Army's institutional whitewashing of its failure in Vietnam; rather than acknowledge its unwillingness to adapt, the Army had in the aftermath of Vietnam blamed its political leadership for not delivering it the kind of war it wanted to fight.[11]

The argument of Krepinevich and other so-called 'hearts and minders' found a new audience after 2001, as the US became embroiled in insurgencies

[7] On the Phoenix program see Dale Andrade *Ashes to Ashes: The Phoenix Program and the Vietnam War,* Lexington Books, Lexington, 1990.
[8] Gian Gentile 'A (Slightly) Better War: A Narrative and Defects', *World Affairs,* (Summer 2008) , pp. 61-62.
[9] Two examples being John Paul Vann, who did not survive the war but whose service was widely publicised in Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie,* Picador, London, 1990 and Colonel David Hackworth, *About Face,* Pan Books, Sydney, 1990, p. 613.
[10] Andrew Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam,* The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1986, p. 259.
[11] Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam,* pp. 268-269.

in Iraq and Afghanistan.[12] Soldier-scholars such as John Nagl repeated Krepinevich's basic criticism that the Army had failed in Vietnam because it had failed to adapt – with the obvious inference that if the US was to succeed in Iraq and Afghanistan it had to adapt to the realities of counterinsurgency. US military and political leadership enthusiastically embraced this argument at the time, not because it was necessarily true but rather because it provided a simple narrative device that explained changes in US strategy and doctrine.[13] As one critic put it, Nagl's *Learning to Eat Soup With a Knife* 'shoehorn[ed] the American experience [in Vietnam] into a narrowly constructed social science model without thoroughly analysing how the army conducted operations on a daily basis.'[14] Rather than being done on its own merits, research into pacification has, in recent times, been increasingly conducted in order to provide evidence for predetermined views regarding the correct course of action in Iraq and Afghanistan. The result was a distorted picture that lacked both detail and context.

In contrast to the historians such as Krepinevich, however, an increasingly vocal revisionist school emerged in the 1980s and 1990s that argued that the pacification program had succeeded in its aims. Historian Lewis Sorley argued in his 1999 work *A Better War* that the US Army had been failing at pacification until the arrival of General Creighton Abrams as commander Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) in mid-1968. In Sorley's view Abrams understood pacification in a way his predecessor Westmoreland had not, and by implementing new tactics was able to defeat the NLF.[15] Mark Moyar's 1998 *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey* ostensibly focused on the Phoenix program, but in reality amounted to a defence of both the morality and success of pacification.[16] In addition to these specific works, a number of more general

[12] The term 'hearts-and-minders' from Gary Hess, 'The Unending Debate: Historians and the Vietnam War', *Diplomatic History,* Vol. 18 No. 2, 1994, p. 241.
[13] Gian Gentile 'A (Slightly) Better War: A Narrative and Defects', p. 61.
[14] Gregory Daddis, *Westmoreland's War,* Oxford University Press, New York, 2014, footnote 4, p. 218.
[15] Lewis Sorley, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam,* Harcourt Books, Orlando, 1999.
[16] Mark Moyar, *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey: Counterinsurgency and Counterterrorism in Vietnam,* University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 2007.

histories of the war have adopted a similar position. Unfortunately, this school too suffers from conceptual problems. Sorley in particular has come under sustained criticism from other historians for an overreliance on oral history, selective use of sources, insufficient archival research and a 'tendentious rendering of American strategy in Vietnam'.[17] Although this is not true of other revisionist historians, the broad issue of the standard of evidence remains. Many use MACV-generated metrics such as the Hamlet Evaluation System (HES), number of Front cadres neutralised and citizens enrolled in the People's Self-Defence Force (PSDF) to demonstrate the defeat of the Front. While these metrics are not necessarily wrong, numerous studies have highlighted the way in which they need to be treated with caution. They could be the product of short-term trends, for example, or simply falsified altogether.[18] Like all statistical measures they require context – a context difficult to provide in the works not dedicated to pacification, or the history of the program within a single province.

The historiography of pacification in Vietnam could thus be characterised as reasonably shallow, and to some degree distorted by institutional interests. What is required are works that, to borrow Sir Michael Howard's terminology, trade width for depth.[19] In 2007 Canadian historian Terry Copp recounted the exasperated reaction of an American colleague to the publication of his book *Fields of Fire,* about the Canadian Army in Normandy:

> When will you Canadians stop endlessly analysing your three division army? No one else knows the names and personalities of divisional, brigade and even battalion commanders. Why don't you look at the larger picture?[20]

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[17] Gregory Daddis, 'On Lewis Sorley's *Westmoreland: The General Who Lost Vietnam*', *Parameters,* Autumn 2011, p. 100.
[18] For specific discussion of the quality of metrics see Hunt, *Pacification,* pp. 260-261. For a case study in the way metrics could provide a misleading veneer see Kevin Boylan, 'The Red Queen's Race: Operation Washington Green and Pacification in Binh Dinh Province, 1969-70', *The Journal of Military History,* Vol. 73, No. 4, 1195-1230. For a detailed an excellent study of the development and use of metrics in Vietnam see Gregory Daddis, *No Sure Victory: Measuring U.S. Army Effectiveness and Progress in the Vietnam War,* Oxford University Press, New York, 2011; for pacification see particularly pp. 204-206.
[19] Michael Howard, 'The Use and Abuse of Military History', *Parameters,* Vol. XI No. 1., p. 14.
[20] Terry Copp, '21st Army Group in Normandy: Towards a New Balance Sheet', *Canadian Military History,* Vol. 16, No. 1, 2007, p. 73.

Yet by 'endlessly analysing' one comparatively small force in depth, Copp was able to demonstrate that much of the accepted orthodoxy about the nature of combat in the Normandy campaign was false.[21] This thesis adopts a similar approach. By focusing solely on one province over an extended period of time it aims for the depth necessary to challenge some of the orthodoxies regarding pacification.

Several other such case studies exist, but while these works are generally of high quality, they do not necessarily fill the historiographical holes outlined above. Jeffrey Race's *War Comes to Long An*, for example, is a sophisticated analysis of the origins of the insurgency in South Vietnam that is rightly regarded as a classic. But Race's primary interest is in building a theoretical model that explains revolutionary dynamics, and his book – grounded as it is in contemporary field work rather than archival research – is in many ways more a work of anthropology than history.[22] On the other hand Eric Bergerud's *The Dynamics of Defeat: The Vietnam War in Hau Nghia Province* is an excellent case study that, focusing as it does on pacification and the interaction of external 'Free World' forces with the program, serves as something of a model for this thesis. Yet, having first been published in 1993 and never subsequently updated, *The Dynamics of Defeat* suffers from its lack of access to twenty years of scholarship – particularly regarding the Communist side of the war, which has become increasingly well documented as relations with the Socialist Republic of Vietnam have become normalised. Consequently, there is still a need for further provincial case studies focusing on pacification.[23]

The choice of Phuoc Tuy province as the location for this case study is also important. Between 1966 and late 1971 the 1st Australian Task Force

[21] Copp, '21st Army Group in Normandy', p. 73.
[22] Jeffrey Race, *War Comes to Long An,* University of California Press, Berkeley, 2010.
[23] Eric Bergerud, *The Dynamics of Defeat: The Vietnam War in Hau Nghia Province,* Westview Press, Boulder, 1993. David Elliott has also produced an excellent and exhaustive provincial case study, but overwhelmingly from the view of the VWP. David Elliott, *The Vietnamese War: revolution and social change in the Mekong Delta 1930-1975 (concise edition),* M.E. Sharpe, Armonk, 2007.

(1ATF) was based, and primarily operated, in Phuoc Tuy. This presence is in one sense well documented, but the historiography of Australia's military involvement in Vietnam has its own problems. The field is dominated by veterans' memoirs, accounts of individual engagements – notably Long Tan in August 1966 – and unit histories.[24] The latter continued the tradition begun after the First World War of veterans documenting the stories of their units – largely individual battalion tours of the Royal Australian Regiment (RAR) but also the likes of the Special Air Service (SAS) and Australian Army Training Team Vietnam (AATTV).[25] While the quality of these works varies greatly from excellent to mediocre, the vast majority are narrative histories that emphasise the experience of the individual soldier, in keeping with the tradition of 'democratic' Australian military history.[26]

The dominance of this 'democratic' history has meant there is a general lack of context for Australian operations in Phuoc Tuy, particularly concerning pacification. Some histories, notably Frank Frost's *Australia's War in Vietnam* and John Murphy's *Harvest of Fear,* have attempted to provide this context by discussing the nature of the insurgency and the Australian response to counterinsurgency.[27] But pacification is not the primary concern of either work and both are somewhat dated, having been published in 1987 and 1993 respectively. The three relevant (and superb) volumes of the official history

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[24] Notable memoirs that show the range of tone and focus of the genre are Gary McKay, *In Good Company,* Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, 1987; Barry Heard, *Well Done, Those Men,* Scribe, Melbourne, 2007; Robert O'Neill, *Vietnam Task: The 5th Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment , 1966-67,* Cassell Australia, Melbourne, 1968. Gerard Windsor, *All Day Long The Noise of Battle,* Pier 9, Millers Point, 2011, and Gary McKay, *Delta Four: Australian Riflemen in Vietnam,* Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, 1994, are two other excellent accounts that deal with the experience of individual soldiers. Examples of treatments of individual engagements include Lex McAulay, *The Battle of Coral,* Hutchinson, Hawthorn, 1988 and Lex McAulay, *The Battle of Long Tan,* Hutchinson, Hawthorn, 1986.

[25] The best battalion histories include Bob Breen, *First to Fight,* The Battery Press, Nashville, 1988; Robert Hall, *Combat Battalion: the Eighth Battalion in Vietnam,* Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, 2000 and Michael O'Brien, *Conscripts and Regulars with the Seventh Battalion in Vietnam,* Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 1995. Regimental histories include David Horner, *SAS: Phantoms of War: a history of the Australian Special Air Service,* Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, 2002; David Horner (ed) *Duty First: the Royal Australian Regiment in war and peace,* Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, 2008; Ian McNeill, *The Team: Australian Army advisers in Vietnam,* Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1984.

[26] Jeffrey Grey, 'Cuckoo in the Nest? Australian Military Historiography: The State of the Field', *History Compass,* Vol. 6 No. 2, 2008, p. 456-457.

[27] John Murphy, *Harvest of Fear,* Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, 1993; Frost, *Australia's War in Vietnam*.

series *Australia's Involvement in Southeast Asian Conflicts 1948–75* also provide background to, and some analysis of, the pacification program in Phuoc Tuy.[28] At the same time their primary concern remains chronicling the operations of 1ATF. Consequently pacification in Phuoc Tuy remains a subject discussed only in the context of its impact on the Australian force rather than on its own merits.

It may seem strange to complain that Australian military history focuses too much on Australian experiences. But the laser-like focus on Australian individuals and units and the engagements they fought has resulted in increasing distortions of their success or failure. In his 2008 work *Vietnam: The Australian Story* Paul Ham argued that 1ATF 'won a tactical victory over a small Vietnamese province', citing comments made by Major General Michael Jeffery in 2002 as evidence: 'we Australians had everything under control in Phuoc Tuy Province and one wonders if those tactics could have been employed throughout the rest of South Vietnam, whether the outcome might not have been different.'[29] Yet what defined victory, and how could it be the sole responsibility of 1ATF? The Task Force was but one part of a larger Free World presence in the province that included South Vietnamese troops, paramilitary units and police, US and Australian advisers and US combat units. The comments of both Ham and Jeffrey point to the way in which the 'Australian' in Australian military history obscures the broader picture and distorts our understanding of what actually happened.

This thesis thus addresses several problems stemming from two related historiographical issues. It aims to establish the nature and methodology of the pacification process in Phuoc Tuy and the extent to which it succeeded in achieving its objectives. As a subset of this, it also examines the role 1ATF

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[28] Ian McNeill, *To Long Tan: the Australian army and the Vietnam war 1950-1966,* Allen & Unwin in association with the Australian War Memorial, St Leonards, 1993, Ian McNeill and Ashley Ekins, *On the Offensive: the Australian Army in the Vietnam War, January 1967 – June 1968,* Allen & Unwin in association with the Australian War Memorial, Crows Nest, 2003, and Ian McNeill and Ashley Ekins, *Fighting to the Finish: the Australian Army and the Vietnam War, 1968-1975,* Allen & Unwin in association with the Australian War Memorial, Crows Nest, 2012.

[29] Paul Ham, *Vietnam: The Australian War,* HarperCollins, Sydney, 2007, p. 662; quoting speech by Major General Michael Jeffrey to AATTV Reunion Dinner, Perth, 31 August 2002.

played in pacification. In doing so this thesis will contribute to both a better understanding of pacification and the activities of 1ATF over the course of its deployment. This is of importance because, as outlined above, the experience of pacification continues to be invoked in the ongoing debates around the nature and efficacy of counterinsurgency. This thesis aims to provide a clearer picture of the reality of pacification and in doing so help accurately inform these debates. At the same time, it is important that relevant institutions such as the Australian Army are able to learn from their past. Much is now being made of the way in which the British Army, based on a flawed understanding of past operations, entered the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq believing it had mastered counterinsurgency and that this belief consequently resulted in poor performance.[30] By placing the activities of 1ATF into a broader context, this thesis will help prevent incorrect lessons from being derived from Australia's involvement in Vietnam.

To achieve these goals this thesis draws on a wide range of archival sources. Research was undertaken in the United States National Archives and Records Administration, which holds the records of Military Assistance Command Vietnam and specifically CORDS Team 89 – the US advisory presence in Phuoc Tuy. Extensive work was also done into the archives of the Australian Army, held in the Australian War Memorial. Research was also undertaken in the National Australian Archives, accessing the records of the Australian Embassy in Saigon – particularly valuable given they often focus on the non-military aspects of pacification. Owing to barriers of language and access research has not been undertaken in Vietnamese archives. However this thesis benefits to a great extent from the work of Ernest Chamberlain, who has begun translating (and making freely available) local histories from the Phuoc Tuy area.[31] Although these works suffer from some prominent limitations, not least

[30] David H. Ucko and Robert Egnell, *Counterinsurgency in Crisis: Britain and the Challenges of Modern Warfare,* Columbia University Press, New York, 2013, pp. 1-3. See also James K. Wither, 'Basra's not Belfast: the British Army, 'Small Wars', and Iraq', *Small Wars & Insurgencies,* Vol. 20, No. 3-4, 2009, pp. 611-615.

[31] Dang Tan Huong (ed), *The History of the Struggle and Development of the Party Committee, the Forces and the People of Đất Đỏ District (1930-2005)*, Đồng Nai Collective Publishing House, Biên Hòa 2006; Ernest Chamberlain, *The Viet Cong D445 Battalion: their story,* self-published, Point Lonsdale, 2011; Ernie Chamberlain, *The Viet Cong D440 Battalion: Their Story,* Point Lonsdale,

their need to observe political orthodoxies and their grounding in memory, they are nonetheless a valuable insight into the perspective on the activities of the Vietnamese Worker's Party in Phuoc Tuy. It has also drawn, to a limited extent, on the digital collections of the John F. Kennedy Presidential library and the Vietnam Archive of Texas Tech University.

The thesis has nine chapters, with the first three chapters forming an introductory block. Chapter one explains the causes of the insurgency that broke out in the RVN from 1959 onwards. It demonstrates how the Vietnamese Workers Party, having decided to pursue the reunification of Vietnam through force in early 1959, was able to mobilise support in the RVN by exploiting the grievances of the rural populace around issues such as land tenure and government repression. The second chapter defines pacification and shows how it was the product not only of the situation in Vietnam but also the broader US response to the problem of decolonisation. It establishes that while many Americans were aware that insurgent support stemmed from legitimate grievances, they were often unwilling to confront the political consequences that addressing those grievances would create. Instead they fell back on domestic American experience, arguing that rural populations would respond as they had during the New Deal to direct economic stimulus. The third chapter is a detailed introduction to Phuoc Tuy that maps the political and economic geography of the province, setting the stage for the arrival of 1ATF in mid-1966.

The remaining six chapters are a narrative that details the course of pacification in Phuoc Tuy between 1966 and 1972. A chronological rather than thematic approach has been taken for a number of reasons. Events in Phuoc Tuy did not occur in a vacuum and the nature of the pacification program changed considerably in line with changes in the nature of the broader war. In addition, changes within 1st Australian Task Force often influenced the course of pacification. Such changes included both its composition and its role, with the commanding officers given wide latitude in pursuing their own operational

2013; Danh, Phan Ngoc & Thai, *The History of the Revolutionary Struggle in Long Dat,* Dong Nai, 1986.

concept. It is thus necessary to use a chronological structure in order to accurately chart these events and put them in context. The thesis concludes by summarising the arguments made and discussing the way in which the military collapse and occupation of the Republic of Vietnam in April 1975 shapes any assessment of pacification.

In conclusion, this thesis explores the conduct and assesses both the achievements and failures of 'pacification' in Phuoc Tuy province between 1966 and 1972. It does so in the first instance in order to improve scholarly understanding of the policy, the study of which has been increasingly distorted in recent times by institutional concerns. In the process the thesis seeks to challenge existing preconceptions about the nature of the Australia's war in Phuoc Tuy. The thesis explains how pacification was influenced by both the practical experience of counterinsurgency in the post war period and the theoretical models of modernisation and development produced by Western academia in the late 1950s – models that called for Vietnamese society itself to be rebuilt in order to defeat the Communist insurgency. It seeks to show how these theoretical models often produced unexpected results when implemented in practice in Phuoc Tuy, and how rural society in the province proved stubbornly resistant to many of these changes. Finally it explains why, while pacification ultimately did help change Phuoc Tuy's social, political and economic structure, it never fully succeeded in its ultimate aim of defeating the National Liberation Front.

Chapter 2. Drying the Grass, Lighting the Fire

Writing in 1959, Austro-American political scientist Joseph Buttinger observed of the Republic of Vietnam that 'so strong was the belief of its early demise that its existence today is frequently referred to as a political miracle – as if the survival of this new state were not so much an unexpected as an essentially inexplicable event'.[32] In July 1954 the CIA officer in charge of covert action in southern Vietnam had bluntly informed his superiors in Washington that the prospects of saving the region from Communism were 'hopeless, but effort must be made'.[33] But by the time of Buttinger's observation the Republic, under the stewardship of Ngo Dinh Diem, had survived and seemed to be prospering. In the north, though, the Communist Democratic Republic of Vietnam struggled with land reform and urban opposition to Party policies.

Yet by 1965 Diem was dead, killed in a November 1963 coup that had been tacitly sanctioned by the Kennedy Administration, and a Communist takeover of the RVN appeared so imminent that the Johnson Administration (and the Menzies government) committed troops to forestall it. What had happened to cause such a rapid deterioration in the prospects of the RVN? This chapter seeks to answer this question by establishing the causes of the insurgency that erupted in the RVN in 1960 and why the efforts of the Diem government to stop it failed. Although very much controlled by the leadership of the Vietnamese Workers Party (VWP) in Hanoi, the insurgency mobilised support in the South by exploiting widespread grievances in rural areas with the Diem government and the social order it appeared to support. Addressing these grievances was the primary goal of the huge pacification effort initiated by the Johnson Administration in 1966 and continued until US disengagement

[32] Joseph Buttinger, 'A New State in Southeast Asia' in Richard Lindholm (ed), *Vietnam: The First Five Years,* Michigan State University Press, East Lansing, p. 9.
[33] Ahern, *Vietnam Declassified,* p. 7.

in 1972; understanding them and their roots is thus crucial to understanding later efforts to combat them. Equally, the efforts of the Diem government to combat the insurgency – culminating in the ill-fated Strategic Hamlet Program of 1962–63 – need to be examined because they were the first nationwide attempts at pacification; and the reasons they failed foreshadowed many of the fundamental problems the later pacification efforts would encounter.

This chapter follows a largely chronological structure to achieve these objectives. It begins by explaining how the July 1954 Geneva Agreements that ended French control of Indochina represented only a temporary halt in the ongoing struggle for the political future of Vietnam, and why external observers were so pessimistic about the ability of the RVN to win that contest. It then charts the consolidation of power in the South by Ngo Dinh Diem and the ambitious program he implemented to reform South Vietnamese society. It concludes by detailing the creation of the Communist-led insurgency in the RVN after 1959, the nature of the Diem government's responses to that insurgency and the failure of those responses. This sequence will establish how colonialism's inequitable political and economic rural order created the conditions for an insurgency to occur, how the VWP exploited those conditions to create an insurgency, and how the Diem government's efforts to combat these grievances foundered on a combination of weak governance and conceptual disconnect.

The defeat of the French Far East Expeditionary Corps (CEFEO) at Dien Bien Phu in May 1954 and the Geneva Agreements of July ended the colonial period in Indochina. The key provision of the Agreements was the political division of Vietnam along the 17th parallel, with the VWP-controlled Democratic Republic of Vietnam taking control of the zone to the north while the French-sponsored State of Vietnam took control of the south.[34] Chosen VWP cadre in the south assembled at designated points along the coast to be repatriated to the DRV, while in the north the CEFEO embarked from Hanoi and Haiphong to

[34] Carlyle, Thayer, *War By Other Means: national liberation and revolution in Viet-nam 1954-60*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1989,p. xxviii.

return to the south – along with a stream of predominantly Catholic Vietnamese, who feared living under a Communist government. This mass movement occurred in microcosm in Phuoc Tuy (at the time known as Ba Ria province): approximately 10,000 Viet Minh soldiers and civilian cadre from across the south embarked for repatriation along the lonely coast of Xuyen Moc district, while thousands of northern Catholics were settled in the province, largely in the new village of Binh Gia in the northern district of Duc Thanh.[35]

The division of Vietnam was not intended to be permanent. Under the terms of the Agreement, internationally supervised elections were to be held in 1956 to determine a new national government for a reunified Vietnam. This provision reflected a conflict within Vietnamese society as to the nature of a postcolonial Vietnam – a conflict that had occurred simultaneously with the fight against the colonial presence. Ho Chi Minh's declaration in Hanoi of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in August 1945 had reflected the growing dominance of the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP, the predecessor to the VWP) within Vietnamese anticolonialism. Arrayed against the ICP were a variety of political parties and religious sects, usually labelled as 'nationalists', who shared little in common beyond a desire for an independent Vietnam and an objection to communism. Although opposed to French control, many of the nationalists gravitated towards the State of Vietnam, a nominally independent government set up by the French in 1948 under the Emperor Bao Dai.[36] As Carl Thayer has argued, the Geneva Agreements succeeded mainly in 'set[ting] the stage for the resumption of domestic conflict'.[37]

Map 1 – *Has been removed due to copyright restrictions.*

[35] Huong (ed), *The History of the Struggle,* p. 6. Thayer gives a slightly higher figure of 15,000 in *War By Other Means,* p. 18.
[36] Edward Miller 'Vision, Power and Agency: The Ascent of Ngo Dinh Diem, 1945-54', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies,* Vol. 35, No. 3, p. 440.
[37] Thayer, *War by Other Means,* p. xiii.

In July 1954 few external observers believed this was a conflict the State of Vietnam could win. This was a view largely based on the practical shortcomings of the new government; it lacked an adequate civil service, a reliable army and leaders with experience in governance. One CIA officer described nationalist politicians as being 'like the bride who couldn't see beyond the church aisle'; so preoccupied had they been with ejecting the French or opposing the Communists that they had devoted little energy to the practicalities of government.[38] The Army, although comparatively large, varied wildly in quality and was controlled by a Francophile senior leadership. The war had also driven the French from the countryside, leaving a vacuum after Geneva that the government struggled to fill. Acting Defence Minister Tran Trung Dung complained to one American that 'the French didn't leave us anything…our problem right now is not trying to keep the Viet Minh from taking over our area, but to take it over before they do'.[39]

Tran's complaints cast the issue as one of logistics, yet there were deeper issues at play. The State of Vietnam had been created by the French to try to assuage Vietnamese nationalism while ensuring the nation stayed within the French Union and under French influence. Its natural base was the European *colons* and the indigenous bourgeoisie who benefited economically and politically from the existing colonial order.[40] But while powerful this class was by definition an elite, and for the majority of Vietnamese the State of Vietnam held little appeal. Those nationalists who joined it did so because their opposition to the communists trumped their opposition to the French, but they had little love for the existing colonial order.[41] Thus in 1954 the State of Vietnam was divided internally, between the Francophiles who hoped to

[38] Thomas Ahern, *CIA and the House of Ngo,* Center for the Study of Intelligence, Washington D.C., 2000, p. 22.
[39] Ahern, *CIA and the House of Ngo,* p. 33.
[40] David Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial 1920-1945,* University of California Press, Berkley, 1981, pp. 25-26.
[41] Francois Guillemot, '"Be Men!" Fighting and Dying for the State of Vietnam (1951-54)', *War & Society,* Vol. 31. No. 2. August 2012, p. 196.

preserve a version of the colonial order in the south and a variety of nationalists who demanded nothing less than full independence.[42]

The association of the State of Vietnam with the colonial order also had ramifications for the new nation's prospects in rural areas. Prior to 1946 rural life throughout Vietnam but particularly in the south had been defined by an inequitable economic and political system that revolved primarily around the ownership of land. In *War Comes to Long An* Jeffrey Race argued that 'no other factor looms so large in the consciousness of the peasant': land was not only the key to economic survival but crucial in Vietnamese culture due to the rites of ancestor worship.[43] But during the colonial period many farmers lost ownership of their land and became tenants to wealthy landlords, with the 1960–61 Agricultural census estimating that of the 1,330,000 farmers in the Delta Region of South Vietnam (which included Phuoc Tuy) approximately 1,000,000 were tenants.[44]

The economic weakness of these tenant farmers stripped away their ability to decide their own fate. Landlords often charged rental rates of between 40 and 60 percent of the annual rice yield, preventing farmers amassing the capital necessary to buy back their land.[45] The accumulation of this capital allowed landlords to dominate the village council an organisation in which positions were theoretically awarded on merit but in reality were bought and sold. The village was the key administrative unit in Vietnamese government and the council had authority over 'administration, finance, justice, religious rites, and welfare'.[46] The landlord class thus in practice controlled both the economic and political life of the village, which in turn lead to petty corruption. Perhaps the most egregious of this corruption was the growth in the number of rent collectors. Beginning in the 1930s many of the wealthier landlords began to decamp to urban areas, delegating the task of collecting rent from tenants to the

[42] Jessica Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and 1950s Southern Vietnam,* Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 2013, pp. 66-68.
[43] Race, *War Comes to Long An,* p. 6.
[44] Robert Sansom, *The Economics of Insurgency*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1970, p. 54.
[45] Sansom, *The Economics of Insurgency,* p. 55.
[46] Race, *War Comes to Long An,* p. 8.

designated rent collectors. These proxies were often allowed to keep whatever extra payment they were able to extract from the tenants. This, combined with the control of local government, led to numerous abuses, with Race describing the Vietnamese phrase for 'rent collectors' as 'probably the most hated word in the peasant vocabulary'.[47]

The ICP recognised that discontent at the nature of the colonial order in rural areas could be turned into support for the independence struggle. In an effort to build as broad a political coalition as possible, landlords were given a choice by the Viet Minh cadre who began arriving in villages in 1946. They could support the revolution by lowering rental rates for their tenants to 20 percent and paying taxes to the Viet Minh, or they could face the consequences. When many opted to flee to the safety of French-controlled urban areas, the ownership of their land was given back to the tenants who farmed it. As Robert Sansom put it, 'the gradual retreat of landlords to the cities that had begun in the 1930s for reason of role and preference, in the 1946–48 period became a panic-stricken exodus to escape intimidation, assassination, or trial and probable execution by the Viet Minh'.[48]

This policy had obvious advantages for the Viet Minh. The lowering of rents, the redistribution of land and the general curbing of landlord power generated support among the rural majority, who suddenly found their economic and political prospects greatly improved, and provided a taxation base for the Viet Minh. At the same time, the 'exodus' of landlords effectively hollowed out local government in the countryside. Critically, this also emphasised in the minds of the peasantry the link between their economic and political condition and the presence of the government in the village. Phrases such as 'anticolonialism' can obscure the fact that much of the opposition to the French presence in Vietnam stemmed not from an innate patriotism or nationalism but an objection to the social order colonialism had created. The

[47] Race, *War Comes to Long An,* p. 8.
[48] Sansom, *The Economics of Insurgency,* p. 55.

logical extension of this was that if this social order persisted beyond the formal end of colonialism in Vietnam then some form of conflict was likely to continue.

This was the fundamental problem the State of Vietnam faced as it rushed to regain control of the countryside. As Jeffrey Race puts it:

> For a large part of the population the war had actually meant an immediate, or at least a prospective improvement in their condition, although at the cost of occasional violence … In 1954, then, the end of violence was welcomed by all, but "the return to normal" was not. A significant part of the population was either indifferent or strongly embittered toward the new government, both as sponsor of the returning landlords and village councils, and as the successor to the French.[49]

The association between the government and the old order was emphasised by the continued use of proxies by absentee landlords. Many of those who had fled between 1946 and 1948 refused to return to their villages, instead hiring government soldiers or minor officials to act as rent collectors. After years of living with rent reduced or entirely absent, few farmers were willing to countenance a return to the standards that had existed prior to 1946, and this further increased resentment towards the government.[50]

It is thus unsurprising that many doubted whether the State of Vietnam could survive in the long run. It lacked both the physical means to control the people within the territory that the Geneva Agreements had given it and the political authority to appeal to them. Its active supporters were a minority within the population and fundamentally divided between those who saw the State of Vietnam as a proxy for continuing French control and maintenance of the colonial order, and nationalists who saw it as the start of a genuinely independent, non-communist Vietnam.

The man who would assume the task of ensuring the RVN survived was Ngo Dinh Diem, who was appointed by Bao Dai as Premier of the State of

[49] Race, *War Comes to Long An,* p. 11.
[50] Sansom, *The Economics of Insurgency,* p. 56.

Vietnam on 19 June 1954. Born in 1901 in Hue into a Catholic and mandarin family, Diem joined the civil service and quickly distinguished himself at the Imperial Court, being appointed to govern a province at the age of 28. Four years later he accepted an offer from the then-reformist Emperor Bao Dai to become Interior Minister but resigned after a few months, citing the failure of the French to allow proposed reform.[51] This resignation kept him out of power for the next 20 years. The traditional view is that Diem's adherence to his anticommunist and anticolonial views and legendary stubbornness and unwillingness to compromise prevented his return to government. In reality, as Edward Miller has shown, Diem was deeply involved in Vietnamese politics between his resignation and the creation of the State of Vietnam in 1948, and it was personal calculation and miscalculation that led him to turn down offers from Bao Dai in 1945 and 1949 and Ho Chi Minh in 1946 to join their respective governments.[52] It was only after he had failed to convince Bao Dai to push for greater concessions for the State of Vietnam in 1948 that Diem disengaged from local Vietnamese politics, instead trying to drum up support overseas. From 1950 to 1954 he lived in the United States, where he was able to cultivate numerous supporters – including then-Senator John F. Kennedy. [53]

Diem's appointment to the premiership in 1954 is often cast as a decision made in Washington, and one that was heavily influenced by the politics of the Cold War – Diem's staunch anticolonialism and anticommunism made him a perfect candidate in American eyes, a leader who could not be cast as a neo-colonial stooge and was not susceptible to the lure of socialism.[54] But the fact is Diem was not foisted upon Bao Dai, and his appointment reflected internal Vietnamese concerns rather than American desires. Bao Dai and Diem held a low opinion of one another but the former recognised that if the State of Vietnam were to survive it needed to cultivate US support, and that Diem was

[51] Philip Catton, *Diem's Final Failure: prelude to America's War in Vietnam, University Press of Kansas, Lawrence, 2002,* pp. 5-7.
[52] Miller, 'Vision, Power and Agency' 1945-54', p.436.
[53] Catton, *Diem's Final Failure,* pp. 5-7.
[54] For a typical example of the view that Diem was chosen by US officials see James Carter, *Inventing Vietnam: the United States and State Building,* Cambridge University Press, New York, 2008, p. 43; for a discussion of CIA perspective see Ahern, *House of Ngo,* p. 24.

the man best placed to accomplish that.[55] This realisation had been reinforced in October 1953 when the delegates of a 'National Congress' convened by Bao Dai voted for total independence from France and the French Union. What was supposed to have been a display of the support for Bao Dai within Vietnam instead turned into a dramatic demonstration of the collapse of support for the colonial political model. Diem presented as a natural answer – a man whose anticolonialism and anticommunism made him the perfect candidate in the eyes of the nationalist politicians who were rebelling against Bao Dai.[56]

Diem's appointment ensured the triumph of the nationalists within the State of Vietnam, although this was not immediately apparent. The newly installed Premier faced a variety of hostile armed forces, including the Hoa Hao and Cao Dai religious sects and the Binh Xuyen, a criminal gang who controlled Saigon's underworld and served as a de facto militia in the city. The Army, dominated by a Francophile leadership, could not be relied on. But thanks to a combination of his relentless self-belief and some fortuitous events, Diem prevailed. He successfully outmaneuvered Vietnamese National Army commander (and French citizen) General Nguyen Van Hinh, who eventually went into self-imposed exile in France. With at least some of the Army now loyal to him, Diem was able to break the power of the Binh Xuyen in April 1955 and in doing so both convinced the Eisenhower Administration to continue to support him and demonstrated Bao Dai's total lack of power within Vietnam.[57] Diem capped off this remarkable period by holding a referendum on 23 October 1955 in which voters endorsed the creation of a Republic, ending Bao Dai's formal hold on power. Three days later Diem announced the creation of the Republic of Vietnam, with himself as President.[58]

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[55] Miller, 'Vision, Power and Agency', pp. 455-456; Catton, *Diem's Final Failure,* p. 7.
[56] Miller, 'Vision, Power and Agency', pp. 453-454.
[57] For detailed examination of this period see Ahern, *House of Ngo,* Ch 3-7; Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance,* pp. 87-115; and Edward Miller, *Misalliance,* Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2013, pp. 85-123.
[58] Arthur Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience of the French and the Americans: nationalism and communism in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam,* Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2001, p. 298.

Diem was, and remains, one of the most controversial figures of the war in Vietnam. His background, personality, political program and style of rule sharply divided contemporary opinion. As Phillip Catton has pointed out, these diverging opinions often stemmed from the same basic caricature of the man: an 'old-fashioned patriot, intensely nationalistic and steeped in the autocratic culture of the Vietnamese past'.[59] For many, Diem's Catholic faith and Confucian background combined to create an autocrat hopelessly wedded to a romantic version of Vietnam that had long since ceased to exist. For others, Diem's links to both an identifiably Vietnamese tradition and Western modernity made him ideal for steering the new Republic of Vietnam, with his autocracy merely a reflection of Vietnamese culture and the need for a steady hand to be on the tiller. Both of these views survive in modern historiography. The former, of Diem as an obsolete tyrant, surfaced most prominently in Seth Jacobs' 2006 effort *Cold War Mandarin: Ngo Dinh Diem and the origins of America's war in Vietnam, 1950-1963*.[60] The latter was put forward forcefully by Mark Moyar in *Triumph Forsaken* (also published in 2006). Diem, Moyar argued, was a strong and effective leader whose autocratic tendencies reflected 'the prevailing Vietnamese belief that whoever had actual military and political power was legitimate.'[61]

Recent work by historians such Edward Miller, Phillip Catton and Jessica Chapman have, however, seriously challenged the prevailing caricatures of Diem.[62] Miller shows that Diem, far from being in hock to an obsolete past, was

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[59] Phillip Catton, 'Ngo Dinh Diem and South Vietnam Reconsidered' in Andrew Wiest and Michael J. Doidge (eds), *Triumph Revisited: Historians Battle for the Vietnam War,* Routledge, New York, 2010, p. 29.

[60] Seth Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin: Ngo Dinh Diem and the origins of America's war in Vietnam, 1950-1963*, Rowman and Littlefield, Lanham, 2006. For an example of the continuity of this explanation see Dennis Warner, *The Last Confucian: Vietnam, South East Asia and the West,* Angus and Robertson, Sydney 1964.

[61] Mark Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken,* Cambridge University Press, New York, 2006, p. 58. *Triumph Forsaken* has provoked an enormous debate among historians – see for example footnote 62 and 138. Moyar's insistence, however, that Vietnamese culture meant Diem's method of ruling was not only justified but also welcome has drawn a particular storm of protest for its orientalist implications. See in particular Sophie Quinn-Judge, '*Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War 1954-1965* by Mark Moyar', *Journal of Contemporary History,* Vol. 44, No. 1, Jan 2009, pp. 175-177.

[62] Catton, *Diem's Final Failure*; Miller, *Misalliance*; Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance.* In addition, all three authors refute Moyar's position, and the revisionist position more generally, in Andrew

an 'intellectual magpie' who learned 'to weave new theories and doctrines out of the conceptual strands he had collected from diverse religious and philosophical sources.'[63] The result was that Diem and his brother were, in Catton's characterisation, 'conservative modernizers', men who did not want to drag Vietnam back to an idealised pre-colonial state but rather intended to create a modern society that was still identifiably Vietnamese.[64] Diem and Nhu themselves described their political program in radical terms. On assuming the Premiership, Diem declared that 'I will move with determination to open a path to national salvation. A total revolution will be implemented in every facet of the organisation and life of the nation.'[65] These were not the words of a conservative mandarin.

Underpinning this would-be revolution was the French Catholic doctrine of Personalism. Its primary concern was the balance between the needs of the individual and the needs of the collective within society. Emmanuel Mounier, the lay philosopher through whom Nhu first encountered Personalism, bemoaned liberal capitalism as a system that encouraged individual self-interest at the expense of the collective. But equally Mounier had little regard for socialism, believing its emphasis on collectivism and material conditions stripped individuals of both their rights and their spirituality. What Personalism called for was a society in which the rights of the individual were respected but in which the individual acted out a responsibility to the collective.[66]

Personalism appealed to the Ngos for a number of reasons. It offered a critique not only of communism but also of colonial capitalism and the indigenous bourgeoisie it had produced. The Ngos despised the latter and saw its members as perfect examples of a group of individuals who had, through their eager embrace of colonial market forces, weakened Vietnamese society for

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Wiest and Michael J. Doidge (eds), *Triumph Revisited: Historians Battle for the Vietnam War,* Routledge, New York, 2010.
[63] Miller, *Misalliance,* p. 22.
[64] Catton, *Diem's Final Failure,* p. 35.
[65] Ngo Dinh Diem, 'Hieu-trieu quoc-dan khi ve toi Saigon, ngay 25-6-1954', *Con duong chinh nghia,* vol. 1, quoted in Miller, 'Vision, Power and Agency', p. 457.
[66] Miller, 'Vision, Power and Agency', p. 449.

their own gain. They also believed that the emphasis on balancing collective and individual needs reflected traditional Vietnamese social norms that had been eroded during the colonial era. Personalism therefore offered something of an ideological framework for the creation of a modern society that would nonetheless be identifiably Vietnamese.[67] Critically, however, the Ngos largely failed to transform the broad tenets of Personalism into coherent guidelines or policy. As Miller notes, 'while it was obvious that intended this revolution to be far-reaching as well as antiliberal and anticommunist, the actual substance of his revolutionary agenda would remain maddeningly opaque.'[68] Nhu, who styled himself as the family's political philosopher, was particularly notorious for producing impenetrable, semi-mystical tracts that had little relationship to the practical problems facing the government.[69] While the immediate consequence of this habit was to leave subordinates casting about for adequate direction, it was also indicative of the Ngos' confused thinking on the relationship between the state and the people. In some cases, as with their efforts at land reform, the Ngos attempted to build political support in the countryside by offering the populace concrete incentives. But in other cases, such as the Agroville and the Strategic Hamlet Program, they assumed that the people would see nation-building as their patriotic duty and bear the associated burdens willingly.

Personalism's emphasis on the collective struggle fed into two other interrelated fascinations shared by the Ngo brothers: organising and mobilising the populace and 'grandiose nation-building projects'.[70] During his brother's time in the US between 1950 and 1954 Nhu worked hard to build a political machine for Diem within Vietnam.[71] Once in power he tried to build paramilitary groups that would tie the populace to the government, and repeatedly spoke of creating a 'covert organisation' that would operate within the villages in a similar manner to the Communists.[72] The common thread in

[67] Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance,* p. 121; Catton, *Diem's Final Failure,* pp. 38-41.
[68] Miller, *Misalliance,* p. 46
[69] Ahern, *Vietnam Declassified,* p. 82;
[70] Catton, *Diem's Final Failure,* p. 51.
[71] Miller, *Misalliance,* pp. 46-48.
[72] Ahern, *CIA and the House of Ngo,* p. 91; Ahern, *Vietnam Declassified,* p. 32.

Nhu's efforts was a willingness to bypass rather than improve government bureaucracy in rural areas in order to increase control of the population. But the preoccupation with building organisations and the romance of guerrilla cadre masked the absence of a coherent pro-government message, which in turn demonstrated the Ngos' struggle to understand the sources of peasant frustration in the countryside.

The organisation of the populace was designed in part to facilitate 'nation-building'. Like many postcolonial leaders in Asia and Africa, the Ngos viewed 'underdevelopment' as a serious problem, a noxious legacy of colonialism that threatened to undermine Vietnamese independence.[73] In addition to gradual economic growth, the Ngos were fascinated with programs of action in which the people were mobilised to build an improved nation. An early example of this was the Land Development program, in which the South Vietnamese government resettled ethnic Vietnamese in under-populated areas such as the Central Highlands and Plain of Reeds. Here the strands of Personalism, organisation and nation-building came together. Diem viewed land development as crucial to not only the economic future of the nation but its security as well; populating the Central Highlands with ethnic Vietnamese would create a barrier that would hinder Communist infiltration from the north. At the same time, the actual act of settling the new land would build a sense of national pride and communal spirit in line with Personalist values.[74]

Land Development proved 'a moderate success', with 125,000 people settled across 84 locations by mid-1959. But the program highlighted many of the problems with the Ngos' vision of nation-building. Enthusiasm among potential settlers was muted, forcing local officials to resort to coercion to meet the targets set by the government in Saigon.[75] Fundamentally, much of the rural populace simply did not identify sufficiently with the state to make the kind of individual sacrifices the Ngos believed were needed. This problem, combined with the weakness of the government bureaucracy in the countryside and the

[73] Catton, *Diem's Final Failure,* p. 37.
[74] Catton, *Diem's Final Failure,* pp. 57-9.
[75] Catton, *Diem's Final Failure,* pp. 60-61.

legacy of eight years of virtual civil war, ensured the failure of two other programs and the inflaming of rural sentiment against the Diem regime.

The first of these was Diem's effort at land reform. The President recognised the importance of land tenure, outlining his views to US Vice President Richard Nixon in 1957:

> I am convinced that, if we are to secure the lasting support of an overwhelming majority of the people, the individual farmer must own land he cultivates. In accomplishing this we will at the same time meet, by tangible deeds, the false Communist claim that they are the authentic spokesmen of the hopes and aspirations of the peasantry.[76]

To achieve this, Diem enacted a barrage of legislation. Ordinance 2, passed on 8 January 1955, established a rent minimum of 15 percent and a maximum of 25 percent. It also set out to guarantee tenant security by instituting 3–5 year contracts.[77] Ordinance 57, of October 1956, limited individual land holdings to 100 hectares, with an additional 15 hectares allowed for family cult/ancestor worship and 30 hectares for personally cultivated land. Excess land was to be bought by the government and then given to tenants, with the landlord paid in a mixture of cash and government bonds.[78]

Diem's land reform program was ambitious. It aimed to break up large estates, reduce rental rates and give tenants security. In doing this Diem hoped not only to undercut a source of grievance that had previously been exploited by the Communists but rebalance domestic politics within the RVN. Creating a large rural middle class at the expense of the landlords would weaken one of the bases of opposition to the Diem government and give them a base of a political support. At the same time, Diem hoped that the capital landlords would receive in return for their land would be invested back into the Vietnamese economy, spurring on industrialisation.[79]

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[76] Saigon to State, July 12, 1956, 851G.20/7-1256, CDF 55-59, RG 59, USNA, quoted in Catton, *Diem's Final Failure,* p. 53.
[77] Sansom, *The Economics of Insurgency,* p. 57.
[78] Sansom, *The Economics of Insurgency,* p. 57.
[79] Catton, *Diem's Final Failure,* pp. 52-3.

Unfortunately for Diem, this program of land reform failed to achieve its aims. Although rental levels never returned to the 40–60 percent that had been common prior to 1946 they remained consistently higher than the maximum mandated in Ordinance 2, with Richard Sansom estimating the usual range was between 25 and 40 percent.[80] The redistribution of land under Ordinance 57 also failed to occur at anticipated levels. By early 1957 around 740,000 hectares had been identified as eligible for redistribution under the new law. But by 1965 only 247,760 hectares had been redistributed to 115,912 farmers – leaving around 817,000 tenant farmers no better off.[81] A report by the Stanford Research Institute in 1967 described the continuing inequality in the Delta:

> To be a tenant in the Mekong Delta meant: to pay an average of 34% of the crop in rent to a landlord who supplied no inputs or support of any description; to exist on the land as a tenant at will or on a year-to-year basis; to have virtually no disposable surplus once the landlord got through; and also meant to name land ownership…*five times as frequently as physical security* as a thing of crucial concern.[82]

The same report found a similar situation existed in the Central Lowlands of the RVN, where tenancy rates were slightly lower but the average rent was considerably higher.

Why did land reform fail? The reasons were partly logistical. The rural bureaucracy simply could not cope with the task of accurately surveying estates, ascertaining tenancy, recording the results, and distributing compensation and titles.[83] More significantly, the reform suffered from a conceptual problem. Most farms in the Mekong Delta were between three-and-a-half and six acres, depending on the percentage of land being rented. Ordinance 57 allowed the retention of 100 hectares, equivalent to 247 acres. Thus, while the law broke up the largest Delta

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[80] Sansom, *The Economics of Insurgency,* p. 56.
[81] Sansom, *The Economics of Insurgency,* p. 57.
[82] Stanford Research Institute, *Land Reform in Vietnam Working Papers,* Volume IV, Part 2, Appendix, 1967, cited in Roy Prosterman, 'Land to the Tiller in South Vietnam: The Tables Turn', *Asian Survey,* Vol. 10, No. 8, 1970, p. 753.
[83] Catton, *Diem's Final Failure,* p. 55.

estates, it allowed landlords to continue to own comparatively huge amounts of land. This stood in contrast to similar reforms in Korea, Taiwan and Japan where private holdings were limited to 3–4 hectares.[84] The Ngos had chosen the much higher limit out of fear of antagonising the landholding class. In the event, landholders were still antagonised, a new rural middle class failed to emerge, and the grievances which the Party had been able to exploit between 1946 and 1954 remained largely intact.

The second of these programs was the effort to destroy the Vietnamese Workers Party within the RVN. The Ngos viewed Communism as a fundamental enemy of the Republic and almost immediately launched efforts to eradicate it. In July 1955 the government began the Anticommunist Denunciation Campaign (ACDC), a propaganda campaign in which people were urged to identify members of the VWP to authorities. The ACDC was complemented by an increasingly repressive campaign, known in Vietnamese as the *To Cong,* to arrest suspected Party members and sympathisers.[85] In a narrow sense, the *To Cong* and ACDC were highly successful. There is almost unanimous agreement across both Western and Vietnamese sources that the government succeeded in decimating the Party apparatus in the South.[86] In Dat Do district in Phuoc Tuy, the government had by early 1957 wiped out all but two of the Party chapters.[87] Examinations of the Party's fate in other provinces during this period by Race and Elliott suggest the situation in Dat Do was typical.[88] By 1958 the situation was so critical that local Party elements began increasingly to question the insistence of VWP leadership in Hanoi that armed struggle not be undertaken. One local history from Phuoc Tuy records the frustration of local cadre during this period, as they questioned senior leadership: 'Why can the enemy attack us,

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[84] Race, *War Comes to Long An,* p. 58.
[85] Miller, *Misalliance,* pp. 132-133, and Ahern, *Vietnam Declassified,* pp. 21-22. The exact relationship of the Denunciation Campaign to the *To Cong* is unclear; Miller, for example, sees the latter as an evolution of the former, rather than as a distinct entity. What all sources agree on is that the campaigns against the Party became progressively more repressive over time.
[86] Ahern, *Vietnam Declassified,* pp. 33-34; Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken,* p. 80; Miller, *Misalliance,* p. 80. Both Moyar and Miller rely extensively on Party sources for their conclusion that the VWP was badly hurt by the ACDC.
[87] Huong (ed), *The History of the Struggle,* p. 7.
[88] Race, *War Comes to Long An,* pp. 97-101 and Elliott, *The Vietnamese War*, p. 101.

but we're not allowed to attack them? Why are we armed with weapons, but must stand by and watch the enemy kill our countrymen and comrades?'[89]

But the success of the *To Cong* came at a high cost for the government. Many of the government officials, policemen and soldiers responsible for implementing it had previously worked for the colonial administration and they brought a mixture of incompetence, brutality and lingering resentment to the task.[90] Many clearly did view the Geneva Agreements as merely a ceasefire, and undertook activities as part of the *To Cong* either to gain revenge on people they still saw as the enemy or to 'get them before they get us'.[91] The heavy handedness of the *To Cong* was exacerbated by the tendency of the Ngos to conflate any opposition to their rule with Communist subversion.[92] As Jessica Chapman notes, a suite of ostensibly anti-communist laws enacted by the Ngos between 1956 and 1959 were written 'in the most general terms possible in order to broaden the definition of crimes against the state and define all of the government's critics as criminals.'[93] The result was what one CIA officer described as 'absolutely senseless acts of suppression against both real and suspected Communists and sympathizing villagers', with 'total disregard for the difference between determined foes and potential friends'.[94] In short, the campaign succeeded in gutting the Party not because it accurately identified serving Party members but simply because it threw a wide enough net of repression.

This understandably generated a tremendous rural backlash against the government. One RAND Corporation study concluded 'that the campaign, while it hurt the Vietminh organization in South Vietnam badly, also created conditions which surviving Vietminh agents were able to exploit in rebuilding

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[89] Chamberlain, *The Viet Cong D445 Battalion,* pp. 4-5.
[90] Josepth Zasloff, *Origins of the insurgency in South Vietnam, 1954-1960: the role of Southern Vietminh cadres,* RAND, Santa Monica, 1968, p. 10.
[91] Ahern, *Vietnam Declassified,* p. 21.
[92] Ahern, *Vietnam Declassified,* p. 22.
[93] Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance,* p. 183.
[94] Ahern, *Vietnam Declassified,* p. 25.

the insurgent organization'.[95] Surviving Party members assiduously cultivated those targeted by these waves of repression, including members of religious sects, the Binh Xuyen, and former Viet Minh who had left the organisation after 1954.[96] In Phuoc Tuy, for example, remnants of the Binh Xuyen forces defeated by Diem in 1955 were absorbed by the local Party, and eventually became the basis for the province's D445 battalion.[97] By 1956-57, the increasingly draconian punishments levelled by the Ngos against suspected 'Communists' left many with an unenviable choice: join (or re-join) the Party and accept the dangers and hardships of clandestine resistance, or remain in their villages and risk blackmail, imprisonment or even execution by government officials. Many took the former option.[98]

The terrible irony of this was that many of these former Viet Minh, or members of the sects, could well have been broadly sympathetic to the Ngo's goal of building a strong, new, non-Communist Vietnamese society. But the continued power of the old colonial order in the countryside even after its displacement in Saigon helped ensured that the new government failed to capture the legacy of the resistance. The sense of missed opportunity was communicated by former Viet Minh Vo Van Xe to Australian officers in Phuoc Tuy in 1969:

> Despite this betrayal [failure to hold elections], and one can imagine the let-down in such a strong Viet Minh area, the general feeling was that the Diem government had some very good points, and the people were prepared to give it a try. However by 1958 the corruption and graft had become on such a large scale and so obvious, that whatever popular support the regime had enjoyed had rapidly disappeared.[99]

As David Elliott has argued, 'continuity between the old colonial village administration and the Diem local governments undercut the GVN's

[95] Zasloff, *Origins of the insurgency in South Vietnam,* p. 13.
[96] Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance,* p. 185.
[97] Chamberlain, *The Viet Cong D445 Battalion,* pp. 1-2.
[98] Donnell, *VC Recruitment,* pp. 66-69 and Zasloff, *Origins of the Insurgency in South Vietnam,* p. 19.
[99] 'Record of Conversation with Village Chief at Tam Phuoc YS4558 2100 hrs to 2400 hrs 21 Nov 69', 21 November 1969, p. 2; 201/1/15 PART 2 A4531, NAA.

[Government of Vietnam] attempt to claim solidarity with the independence struggle of the Resistance while persecuting those who led it'.[100]

Thus by the time Buttinger was writing his tribute to the survival of the RVN in 1959, the young Republic faced a serious crisis in the countryside. One Communist cadre subsequently argued that massive growth of the insurgency in the following two years reflected 'not that [surviving] cadres were exceptionally gifted' but that the rural population was 'like a mound of straw, ready to be ignited'.[101] The Ngos' land reform had alienated landowners while failing to address inequity in the countryside or create a middle class loyal to the Republic. In contrast, the *To Cong* had succeeded in nearly destroying the VWP's southern presence, but the indiscriminate nature of the campaign had alienated many villagers and former Viet Minh who might otherwise have been sympathetic to the regime. The failure of both programs demonstrated the way conflict over the distribution of power in the colonial system persisted after 1954. The Ngos dreamed of transforming Vietnamese society, but the colonial bureaucracy they had inherited prevented them from doing so. This gap between rhetoric and what was actually feasible would prove to be a reoccurring phenomenon in pacification.

The seriousness of the situation in the countryside became apparent over the course of 1960. US Embassy officials reported a steady increase in the level of violence and assassinations in particular from September 1959 onwards, culminating in a nationwide 'offensive' over the Tet holiday period in late January 1960. This included an attack on an Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) Regiment headquarters in Tay Ninh province by Communist forces that resulted in 66 South Vietnamese casualties, the loss of 500 weapons and the destruction of the headquarters itself.[102] In Long An province the government was decimated: out of 117 hamlet chiefs in the province, 90 resigned in response to Communist threats prior to Tet and, of the remainder,

[100] Elliott, *The Vietnamese War,* p. 97.
[101] Unnamed VM cadre, quoted by Zasloff, *Origins of the Insurgency in South Vietnam,* p. 22.
[102] Ahern, *Vietnam Declassified,* pp. 34-35.

26 were assassinated.[103] Violence continued at a high level throughout 1960, with an average of 505 incidents a month nationwide. Although by April 1961 the commander of the US advisory presence could optimistically report that South Vietnamese forces had regained the initiative, his estimate that only 42 percent of the Republic's territory was under government control was a sobering testament to the gains made by the Communists.[104]

What prompted this sudden increase in the scope and intensity of armed Communist activity? US officials were aware that in May 1959 the VWP leadership had passed a resolution that called for reunification by all 'appropriate means' and that this had been matched by increasingly hard-line public rhetoric from those leaders. Although officials acknowledged the discontent created by government actions in the countryside, it was taken almost for granted at the time that the insurgency was a creation of the DRV, a fifth column created to help one sovereign nation conquer another.[105] As US involvement in Vietnam deepened, however, this view was increasingly challenged. Sceptics within the academy argued that the violence was the product of a local backlash against the oppressive policies of the Diem regime, and that it had been endorsed only reluctantly by the VWP leadership in Hanoi.[106] The political implications of the debate ensured it remained both strident and active, with the two schools arguing their differences across opinion pages, policy documents, journal articles and published works.[107]

As more recent scholarship has demonstrated, the reality was more complex. Following Diem's renunciation of national elections, the senior leadership of the VWP was deeply divided over whether or not to seek the

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[103] Race, *War Comes to Long An,* pp. 113-115.
[104] Draft Notes on the First Meeting of the Presidential Task Force on Vietnam, 24 April 1961, *FRUS 1961-1963,* I: 78.
[105] See for example Despatch From the Ambassador in Vietnam (Durbrow) to the Department of State, Saigon, 7 March 1960, *FRUS 1958-1960,* I: 300-303.
[106] Thayer, *War By Other Means,* p. xix.
[107] For example of the 'Northern aggression' school see *Aggression From the North: The Record of North Vietnam's Campaign to Conquer South Vietnam,* US Department of State Publication 7839, Far Eastern Series 130, Washington D.C., 1965 and Wesley R. Fishel, 'The National Liberation Front', *Vietnam Perspectives,* Vol. 1 No. 1, 1965. For 'Southern' perspective see I.F. Stone, 'A Reply to the White Paper', *I.F. Stone's Weekly,* XIII (March 8, 1965) pp. 1-4.

reunification of the two Vietnams by force. The 'Northern' faction, which included Prime Minister Pham Van Dong, Defence Minister Vo Nguyen Giap and Party Chairman Ho Chi Minh, were nominally committed to reunification but believed the DRV was not economically or politically mature enough to sustain a war effort. The 'Southerners', led by southern Party chief Le Duan and Le Duc Tho, wanted a return to armed struggle in the south and the weight of the DRV's resources devoted to the task.[108] Although the 'Southerners' were the weaker faction, Le Duan and Le Duc Tho skilfully exploited the disastrous collectivisation efforts in the north after 1954 to displace many 'Northerners' within the Party hierarchy, and steadily consolidated power between 1956 and 1958. This culminated in the passing of Resolution 15 at the Fifteenth Plenum in January 1959, which endorsed a return to armed struggle in the south.

But while it was strictly accurate for observers such as Professor Wesley R. Fishel to say 'the insurgency in the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) takes its direction and receives vital support from the Communist Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) in the north', his subsequent dismissal of its '"home-grown" character' is misleading.[109] Le Duan and Le Duc Tho represented the southern wing of the Party and when they argued in January 1959 for a resumption of armed struggle, they did so on the back of a clear understanding that further refusal on the part of VWP leaders in Hanoi was unlikely to stop those in the south returning to violence.[110] Indeed, the subsequent creation of the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam (NFLSVN or more commonly NLF) in December 1960 was partly aimed at consolidating the VWP's control of the southern insurgency. In this sense the insurgency was in part a southern initiative, and much of the VWP leadership was reluctant to pursue reunification by force.

Moreover, it should be emphasised that regardless of the political machinations at a national level, the insurgency grew at a local level because it

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[108] Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi's War,* University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 2012, pp. 42-43.
[109] Fishel, 'The National Liberation Front', p. 8.
[110] Nguyen, *Hanoi's War,* p. 45.

was able to exploit the political and economic grievances of local people. The rebuilding of the Party within Phuoc Tuy is instructive in this regard. By 1959 only a handful of cadre remained active in the province, a mixture of those who had remained active Party members after 1954 and former Viet Minh who had rejoined to escape government reprisals. One of the latter was Nguyen Van Nga of Xuyen Moc village. Born in 1932 into a farming family, Nga had joined the Viet Minh in 1946 and had served to the end of the war. After being demobilised in 1954, he fled into the jungle in January 1955 out of fear of being targeted by government security services and rejoined Party forces. After serving with the province's armed reconnaissance unit for two and a half years, Nga was made a probationary member of the VWP in April 1959 and a full member in October that year.[111]

In his study *The Role of Southern Vietminh Cadre,* political scientist Joseph Zasloff found that many former Viet Minh who rejoined the insurgency prior to 1959–60 had done so because of mistreatment at the hands of government officials. Nga's flight into the jungle in January 1955 clearly fits these circumstances. But Zasloff also found that surviving cadre successfully wove these injustices into a broader narrative that provided continuity with the war against the French. Nga had served in the Viet Minh alongside his father and as farmers they were likely to have suffered an economic reversal with the return of government authority in 1954. The argument that the RVN was simply the State of Vietnam with a new neo-colonial sponsor must have been convincing to former Viet Minh cadre being persecuted by the officials they had fought against and thought they had defeated between 1946 and 1954.[112]

The former Viet Minh who returned to the armed struggle, reinforced by the cadre who had regrouped to the DRV in 1954 and began to return from late 1959, formed what Zasloff described as the 'steel frame' of the insurgency. These cadre recruited the next generation of insurgents, who would go on to become the core of the NLF within Phuoc Tuy. The members of this 'second

[111] Personal Biography, Nguyen Van Nga –translation of captured assessment of the subject by Party leadership, 13 October 1969; AWM304 191.
[112] Zasloff, *Origins of the insurgency in South Vietnam,* pp. 19-20.

wave' were typically men aged between 17 and 30 who had not served with the government or in non-communist political organisations and did not have large families to support. Studies by the RAND Corporation found they were typically motivated by 'personal circumstances' and 'the desire for a better life'.[113] Although the studies noted that varying degrees of coercion could be used on potential recruits, many of those targeted responded strongly to the narrative that emphasised the government as the cause of inequity in village life and the NLF and the Party as instruments of change. The studies also found that many recruits were attracted by the meritocratic nature of the NLF, correctly perceiving that they would be rewarded with promotion if they were diligent and hard-working. This stood in contrast to the government, where officials often owed their positions to patronage and corruption rather than merit.[114]

The experience of numerous cadre in Phuoc Tuy conforms to the findings of the RAND corporation studies. Tran Minh Chau was born in Phuoc Hai in 1941 and joined the NLF at the age of 20. He was promoted in September 1962 to command a platoon in D445 battalion and would fight at Binh Gia in December 1964 and Long Tan in August 1966.[115] Vo Van Dau was born in 1935 in Long Phuoc and joined the NLF in May 1960 out of fear he would be conscripted and became a soldier in the Chau Duc district company; he was promoted to section commander in November 1963 and became a probationary Party member a year later.[116] Bui Thai Hung was also born in Long Phuoc in 1934. He joined the village unit after being approached by its leader in 1963 and then steadily worked his way up the ranks, becoming the leader of Chau Duc district's political cell in 1965. In that two-year period he not only fought but also was professionally developed, attending both a squad leaders course and a 4-month remedial education course.[117]

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[113] Donnell, *Viet Cong Recruitment*, p. 26.
[114] Walter Davison and Joseph Zasloff, *A Profile of Viet Cong Cadre,* RAND, Santa Monica, 1966, p. 11.
[115] 'Tran Minh Chau – Interrogation Report', undated; PART 3 171 AWM98.
[116] 'Vo Van Dau – Interrogation Report', undated; PART 3 171 AWM98.
[117] 'Bui Thai Hung – Interrogation Report', undated; 178 AWM98.

All three of these cadre had shared characteristics that tied with the findings of the RAND studies. They were Phuoc Tuy locals who volunteered for the NLF during the insurgency's initial growth phase between 1959 and 1963. Although only Vo Van Dau gave a specific reason as to why he had joined, some inferences can be made from their place of birth. Both Long Phuoc and Phuoc Hai were farming villages with long associations with the Party, suggesting the intertwining of tradition and economic reality. All three cadres were steadily rewarded with promotion up the ranks of the NLF, and both Bui Thai Hung and Vo Van Dau became members of the VWP. Their stories demonstrated how, regardless of it being controlled from Hanoi, the insurgency relied on the exploitation of local grievances in order to grow in the years prior to 1964.[118]

This initial wave of insurgent violence occurred during a change of government in the US, with the election of John F. Kennedy to the Presidency in November 1960. Despite his interest in both counterinsurgency and Vietnam, Kennedy was unaware of the decline in security over 1960, allegedly complaining to aides in early 1961 that President Eisenhower had said nothing about it during their handover.[119] Eisenhower had instead left two significant foreign policy problems for Kennedy in the form of an ongoing crisis in Laos and plans to overthrow the Castro regime in Cuba. By the end of April 1961, both of these situations had turned into significant embarrassments for Kennedy, with a neutralist government installed in Vientiane and Castro gloating about the Bay of Pigs.[120] Kennedy and his advisers viewed both these crises and the growing insurgency in Vietnam in the context of the relationship between the US and USSR and were desperate to demonstrate both to Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev and American allies worldwide that the new President was not weak. Vietnam would be where the US would make its stand against the 'wars of liberation' Khrushchev had vowed the USSR would support.[121]

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[118] See Race, *War Comes to Long An,* pp. 123-124, for an example of this point.
[119] Catton, *Diem's Final Failure,* pp. 76-77.
[120] Lawrence Freedman, *Kennedy's Wars: Berlin, Cuba, Laos and Vietnam,* Oxford University Press, New York, 2000, p. 305.
[121] Freedman, *Kennedy's Wars*, p. 305.

President Diem thus found himself under pressure both internally from a declining security situation and externally from a superpower patron who, in Diem's view, was interfering to an unacceptable degree. The Americans were pushing a suite of measures designed to combat the insurgency that included political reform and an increased American advisory role. Neither of these was acceptable to the Ngos. Diem and Nhu's view that any devolution of power away from them would result in a potentially fatal weakening of the Republic was undoubtedly self-serving but also probably correct in light of events after their overthrow in November 1963. The offer of additional advisers was seen in a similar light – as a backdoor for the US to assume control of the conduct of the war. This was again not purely a product of the Ngos' paranoia: US officials spoke during this period of a 'limited partnership' with the South Vietnamese and 'de facto control'.[122] The Ngos thus needed to find a solution to the growing insurgency that would not only defeat it but that would maintain their power and insulate it from American interference. It was from this need that what became known as the Strategic Hamlet Program was born.[123]

The Strategic Hamlet Program is often described as being heavily influenced by British experience during the Malayan Emergency. Beginning in 1950, British authorities relocated approximately 500,000 ethnic Chinese squatters from their land into purpose built settlements called 'New Villages', guarded by British and Commonwealth troops. The purpose of this relocation was to isolate the guerrillas of the Malayan Communist Party from their sources of political support and supply among Malaya's Chinese community. By 1960 the Commonwealth counterinsurgency campaign had been so successful that, following a visit to Malaya, Diem requested that a British adviser be despatched to the RVN to assist South Vietnamese authorities.[124] This request led to the creation of the British Advisory Mission (BRIAM) in Saigon under Sir Robert Thompson, previously the Malayan Secretary of Defence. In November 1961 Thompson completed the 'Delta Plan', a document designed to apply the

[122] Catton, *Diem's Final Failure,* p. 84.
[123] Catton, *Diem's Final Failure,* p. 98.
[124] Peter Busch, 'Supporting the War: Britain's Decision to send the Thompson Mission to Vietnam, 1960-61', *Cold War History,* Vol. 2. No. 1., pp. 70-71.

Malayan blueprint to South Vietnam. The plan received considerable attention within the Kennedy Administration and is often described as the starting point of the Strategic Hamlet Program, with the strategic hamlets themselves being little more than copies of the 'New Villages'.[125]

While there were superficial parallels between the programs, Phillip Catton has convincingly demonstrated that the Strategic Hamlet Program had its origins in local Vietnamese experiments and the Ngo's Personalist ideology. Even as Diem was requesting British assistance in 1960, Vietnamese officials in Quang Tri, Vinh Long and Tay Ninh provinces were fortifying villages on their own initiative to restrict the access of NLF cadre. In the Central Highlands the CIA was undertaking similar measures in Montagnard communities.[126] As in Malaya, these officials had realised that the NLF relied on the local population for supplies, recruits and intelligence. Limiting access to villages by constructing physical barriers and patrolling was a comparatively simple undertaking that nonetheless greatly complicated the task facing NLF cadre. By mid-1961 the government in Saigon was well aware of these local efforts and their success, as well as the name adopted by the province chief of Vinh Long for his fortified villages – 'strategic hamlets'.[127]

But for the Ngos, the Strategic Hamlet Program was much more than the construction of ditches and bamboo fences. Here at last was a chance to implement the national, Personalist revolution they had wanted. In speeches to government officials Nhu began to describe a 'social revolution…in which a new hierarchy should be established, not based on wealth or position'.[128] This new hierarchy would reward not those individuals who prioritised their own wealth, as had previously been the case, but those who worked for the benefit of the community and the nation. This emphasis on the communal good formed a cornerstone of the program; the Ngos, eager not to become dependent on their

[125] Catton, *Diem's Final Failure,* p. 96; for an example of this see Freedman, *Kennedy's Wars*, p. 336.
[126] Catton, *Diem's Final Failure,* p. 91; Ahern, *Vietnam Declassified,* pp. 39-62.
[127] Catton, *Diem's Final Failure,* p. 91.
[128] FVS 6695, 20 November 1961 and TDCS 3/497,031, 23 December 1961, quoted in Ahern, *Vietnam Declassified,* p. 77.

American patrons, believed the program should be self-sufficient. The inhabitants of the 'strategic hamlets' would be mobilised and through voluntary labour build and man the hamlet defences, Nhu even going so far as to argue that they should be expected to capture their own weapons off the NLF. [129] The destruction of the old order and the mobilisation of the population to build a new one would, the Ngos believed, end the inequity that drove support for the insurgency and create a united nation that was both anticommunist and loyal to the Republic.

In a sense the term 'Strategic Hamlet 'Program' is misleading, as the transition from localised provincial experimentation to formal, nationwide initiative was only gradual. In January 1962 the government set a target of having 11,000 of the RVN's 14,000 hamlets upgraded by June 1963, although both the number and the completion date seem to have been elastic, and the guidelines for what constituted a completed strategic hamlet were only issued in July 1962.[130] In March 1962 Diem also issued a Presidential Decree for restoring security in the Mekong Delta, which designated a number of provinces (including Phuoc Tuy) as 'priority areas' for the construction of strategic hamlets.[131] As part of this strategy ARVN units were used to clear these 'priority areas' of Front units before construction of hamlets began. Although the exact nature of the program remained only loosely defined, by May 1962 US officials were beginning to describe in official reportage the implementation of a 'strategic hamlet program'.[132]

But as had been the case with the Ngos' previous nation-building efforts, the ambitious construction targets proved totally beyond the capacity of the government to achieve. Bureaucrats lacked both the material to build the hamlets and the personnel to organise the locals. One US official reported in April 1962 that 'the program suffers from shortages of all kinds. There are not enough S[elf] D[efence] C[orps], not enough barbed wire, not enough cement,

[129] Ahern, *Vietnam Declassified,* p. 79.
[130] Catton, *Diem's Final Failure,* pp. 130-133.
[131] Decree by the President of the Republic of Vietnam, 16 March 1962, *FRUS 1961-1963*, II: 238-244.
[132] See for example Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Vietnam, 22 May 1962, *FRUS 1961-1963*, II: 414-415 and Rufus Phi

not enough weapons, not enough administrators, not enough cadre, not enough piastres'.[133] Asked to adhere to impossible schedules, many officials tried to placate their superiors in Saigon by focusing on constructing the hamlet's physical defences – creating a façade that suggested progress while hiding the absence of the 'national revolution' the Ngos were most interested in.[134] This was exacerbated by the inability of Diem or Nhu to translate their lofty goals for political and social transformation into concrete objectives; all of the criteria for a completed strategic hamlet that were disseminated in July 1962 related to the construction of physical defences. Unsurprisingly, officials responded to this and largely ignored the vague admonishments issuing from Saigon for social revolution.

Nevertheless, despite the hollow nature of the Strategic Hamlet Program it did cause significant problems for the Front. Incidents of Front-initiated violence steadily declined nationwide as the number of strategic hamlets increased over the course of 1962.[135] Although basic, ditches and fences greatly complicated the task of accessing hamlets, in turn limiting the ability of NLF cadre to gather supplies, recruits and intelligence. The *D445* history states that 'in 1962 about 70 percent of the people in the Province were regrouped to live in the strategic hamlets' and that 'large numbers of those in our political apparatus were captured or were unable to operate any longer.'[136] Although initially slow to react, by late 1962 Front leadership was acknowledging the need to adjust to the threat posed by the strategic hamlets.[137] The ARVN also became increasingly effective, thanks to improved operational performance and an influx of American technology such as helicopters, armoured personnel carriers and radios.[138]

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[133] Memorandum From the Officer in Charge of Vietnam Affairs (Heavner) to the Ambassador in Vietnam (Nolting), 27 April 1962, *FRUS 1961-1963*, II: 358.
[134] Catton, *Diem's Final Failure,* pp. 134-135; Memorandum From the Director of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research (Hilsman) to the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Harriman), 19 December 1962, *FRUS 1961-1963,* II: 792.
[135] *Pentagon Papers* Part IV B-2, p. 30.
[136] *D445* p. 11
[137] Ahern, *Vietnam Declassified,* p. 81;
[138] Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken,* pp. 154-155. Moyar overreaches, however, in claiming that 'the performance of South Vietnam's armed forces entered into a steady ascent that was to continue for the remainder of Diem's time in office'. Edward Miller is correct when he observes that

As Andrew J. Birtle argues, the new effectiveness of ARVN and the implementation of the Strategic Hamlet Program meant that 'the government was no longer losing, but progress was spotty, incremental, and easily reversible.'[139] Moreover as had been the case with the *To Cong*, the long-term ramifications of the construction of physical defences for the new strategic hamlets outweighed the short-term gains. Few villagers embraced the Ngos' vision of a communal workforce building a new hamlet together. In the absence of volunteers, and given the unrealistic timetable, many local officials resorted to coercing the populace into assisting. The *Dat Do* history records how every inhabitant of a strategic hamlet in Phuoc Tuy over the age of 16 was expected to contribute 'at least 50 bamboo trees for the fences and obstacles' while also digging a three-to-five metre long trench to a depth of six metres and a width of three.[140] As was standard through the RVN, they were not compensated for the materials or the labour.[141]

For these villagers the Strategic Hamlet Program would have looked not like a 'social revolution' but rather more of the same – exploitation by government officials to construct programs that the villagers themselves did not benefit from. As Jeffrey Race observed:

> The strategic hamlets, however, represented no positive value to the majority of their inhabitants – on the contrary, as the testimony of even government officials showed, they were a terrific annoyance, through controls on movement which interfered with making a living, through demands for guard duty which interfered with sleep, through the destruction of homes and fields. The pointlessness of this annoyance was amplified by the fact, for a majority of the population, the supposed enemy was not even perceived as a threat, and for a

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'Moyar's assessment of Diem's military efforts against the communist insurgency illustrates his propensity for turning keen historical insights into exaggerated and unsustainable conclusions', and goes on to point out several such examples. Edward Miller, 'Ngo Dinh Diem and Vietnam War Revisionism in Mark Moyar's *Triumph Forsaken*' in Andrew Wiest and Michael J. Doidge (eds), *Triumph Revisited: Historians Battle for the Vietnam War,* Routledge, New York, 2010, p. 202.

[139] Andrew J Birtle, '*Triumph Forsaken* as Military History', in Andrew Wiest and Michael J. Doidge (eds), *Triumph Revisited: Historians Battle for the Vietnam War,* Routledge, New York, 2010, p. 134

[140] Huong (ed), *The History of the Struggle,* p. 10.

[141] Letter From the Officer in Charge of Vietnam Affairs (Heavner) to the Deputy Director of the Vietnam Task Force (Wood), 19 March 1962, *FRUS 1961-1963,* II: 248.

> significant segment the "enemy" even offered substantial positive incentives.[142]

In practice the Strategic Hamlet Program did nothing to solve the problems that most vexed villagers while simultaneously increasing the burden they carried. This was not the first and would not be the last time that a pacification effort foundered because basic diagnoses of the problems in the countryside were not translated into practical, concrete solutions.

The Strategic Hamlet Program also suffered from a deeper conceptual problem. Having identified the existing rural order as the primary cause of the Republic's problems, Nhu and Diem entrusted its destruction to the class of people who stood to lose the most from any change to the status quo. This was not an unfortunate decision that could have been easily avoided, but rather a reflection of the basic reality that the government bureaucracy and rural ruling class were deeply intertwined. This begged an obvious question: why would the rural ruling class willingly participate in its own destruction? Nhu at least was dimly aware of this fundamental problem, but was unable to formulate any kind of solution and so ignored it.[143] This is not to say that the failure of the strategic hamlet program was inevitable. But the basic problem – that top-down reform efforts had to be carried out by the people who stood to lose the most through reform – would bedevil not only the Strategic Hamlet Program but also subsequent pacification efforts.

The problems of the Strategic Hamlet Program began to reveal themselves in the first half of 1963. After the Battle of Ap Bac in January 1963, where two People's Liberation Armed Forces (PLAF) battalions were able to fight off a larger ARVN force equipped with helicopters and armoured personnel carrers, Front leadership authorised a more aggressive campaign against the strategic hamlets. Front-initiated violence began to increase as the NLF responded to the program.[144] In Phuoc Tuy the first such attack was on Bau

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[142] Race, *War Comes to Long An,* pp. 192-193.
[143] Ahern, *Vietnam Declassified,* p. 79.
[144] *Pentagon Papers,* Part IV B-2, p. 31; Catton, *Diem's Final Failure,* p. 191.

Lam hamlet in Xuyen Moc district. The choice of Bau Lam was obviously calculated to achieve maximum political effect; it was the second hamlet in the province, after the Catholic village of Binh Gia, to be upgraded to strategic hamlet status. The D445 history records that 445 Company ambushed the defending soldiers as they left the hamlet and killed 27 of them. 'The people were extremely elated,' the history records, 'and gathered to assist our soldiers in clearing the battlefield, destroying the barbed wire fence and pulling out the steel pickets.'[145]

The accuracy of this account, and in particular its characterisation of the Catholic inhabitants of Bau Lam as being 'extremely elated' to see Communist soldiers destroying the defences of their hamlet, is open to question. Nonetheless, this story is the first example of a scenario that would be repeated in Phuoc Tuy not only in the years 1963-64 but also over the course of the entire war. The Strategic Hamlet Program caused the NLF considerable difficulty because it created a physical and military barrier between the rural populace and the cadre and soldiers of the Front. The core of the Communist response to this problem was to use military force to destroy these barriers. Although the specifics of pacification policy would change repeatedly over the next ten years, the dynamic established at Bau Lam would play out again and again.

In the event it was not the failure of the Strategic Hamlet Program that would bring down the House of Ngo. Although the Kennedy Administration was increasingly concerned by the situation in the countryside in the second half of 1963, it was Diem's handling of domestic political opposition to his government that was the direct cause of the deterioration in the relationship between Saigon and Washington. US agencies began to extend feelers to Diem's opposition, hinting that they would not be averse to change. The increasing isolation of the Ngos from both the population and the military ensured that 'once the Americans had demonstrated their lack of commitment to Diem

[145] Chamberlain, *The Viet Cong D445 Battalion,* p. 16.

himself and had confirmed this privately, the drama followed its own logic'.[146] A group of ARVN officers led by General Duong Van 'Big' Minh mounted a coup on 1 November that succeeded in seizing power. Diem and Nhu were murdered in the back of an armoured personnel carrier that evening.

The fall of the House of Ngo prompted the senior leadership of the VWP to reassess their strategy for achieving reunification. Until that point, the Party's conduct of the war had been in broad accordance with the Maoist model that had brought success against the French. While local guerrillas proselytised in the villages, the strength of the PLAF was steadily built up in remote jungle bases. Despite the attrition caused by military operations, PLAF strength grew from an estimated 4,000 soldiers in 1960 to 22–25,000 in 1963. According to Maoist orthodoxy, this growth of both armed strength and rural 'liberated zones' should have continued until most of the countryside was under Communist control. Once this was accomplished, the PLAF could undertake large-scale warfare, in which armed troops fought and defeated their government equivalents and occupied terrain – presumed, in the Maoist model, to be urban areas under government control – just as a Western army would. [147]

The collapse of the Diem government threw this process into doubt, however. In Saigon, the generals who had mounted the coup were already manoeuvring against each other. With the attention of the RVN's leaders focused on this internecine warfare, the government's position in the countryside continued to decline. A rapid military escalation by the Communists could potentially force a total collapse of the government in the South, avoiding the long build-up of strength that Maoist orthodoxy required. But such a strategy carried risks. What if the United States intervened directly, as it had in Korea a decade earlier, to save its client state? As had been the case in 1959, the debate over this question was framed by the internal politics of the VWP. 'Northerners' favoured the traditional Maoist approach, while 'Southerners' advocated a military build-up. For members of the latter group

[146] Freedman, *Kennedy's Wars,* p. 396.
[147] Graham Cosmas, *MACV: the joint command in the years of escalation, 1962-1967,* Center of Military History, Washington D.C., 2006, p. 72.

such as Le Duan, the debate offered a chance to further discredit the 'Northerners' and consolidate their own power within the VWP.[148]

It was through this mixture of analysis and internal Party politics that Le Duan recommended to the Ninth Plenum of the Central Executive Committee in December 1963 that the VWP accelerate the build up of military forces in the south. In the process he unveiled his own strategic concept of the 'General Offensive – General Uprising' or GO-GU. GO-GU was built on Le Duan's belief that a mass uprising conducted by both the rural and urban proletariats would topple the RVN government, allowing either a neutralist or overtly pro-Communist government to be formed and subsequent reunification to take place. The major obstacle was the ARVN, which could be deployed to suppress any such uprising. Therefore, Le Duan reasoned, if the ARVN could be severely weakened in conventional military action then the general uprising would be made possible.[149] Achieving the conditions in which the GO-GU could take place therefore became the central plank of Communist strategy in 1964.

The decision to pursue Le Duan's GO-GU strategy altered the nature of the war in South Vietnam. Both the US Mission in Saigon and the MACV spent much of 1964 attempting to revive the pacification programs that had collapsed after Diem's removal. But even as they did so it became increasingly clear that the nature of the threat posed by the Front was changing. Intelligence estimates of PLAF strength steadily rose, 'from 27,000 at the beginning of 1964 to 34,000 in July and 48,000 in March 1965'.[150] The number of regiments and battalions in the PLAF order of battle was also believed to have doubled in the second half of 1964. The willingness of these units to engage their ARVN counterparts also appeared to be increasing. US and Vietnamese observers, unaware of the shift in strategy unveiled at the Ninth Plenum, interpreted the growth in PLAF strength and aggression as signs that the Front had shifted to the final stage of Maoist

[148] Nguyen, *Hanoi's War,* pp. 64-5.
[149] Merle L. Pribbenow II, 'General Vo Nguyen Giap and the Mysterious Evolution of the Plan for the 1968 Tet Offensive', *Journal of Vietnamese Studies,* Vol.3, No. 3, 2008, pp. 3-4.
[150] Cosmas, *MACV: joint command in the years of escalation,* p. 192.

warfare. Although technically incorrect, this analysis identified the salient point – that the VWP was attempting to defeat the ARVN in open battle.[151]

This analysis was seemingly confirmed at the Battle of Binh Gia in December 1964. Located near the northern border with Long Khanh, Binh Gia was both the largest and most isolated of the Catholic refugee settlements in Phuoc Tuy. On 28 December the village was attacked and overrun by two local PLAF companies. In response the Joint General Staff dispatched the elite 30th Ranger and 4th Marine Battalions to eject the Front units from the village. Committed piecemeal over two days and without adequate artillery support, both battalions were ambushed and destroyed by the PLAF 9th Division between 29 December and 3 January 1965. Nearly 200 South Vietnamese troops were killed, 190 wounded and just under a further hundred were missing. US losses were also comparatively large: five advisers were killed, eight were wounded and three were captured while two helicopters were also destroyed.[152] Although ARVN reinforcements subsequently liberated the village and mounted extensive sweeps in the surrounding area, the PLAF units were able to withdraw successfully.

For Le Duan, the result of the Binh Gia campaign justified the change in strategy he had championed a year earlier. The PLAF had shown its ability to defeat in battle a large force composed of some of the RVN's best troops.[153] For American and South Vietnamese observers Binh Gia was both a warning that the Front was seeking a military solution in the south and part of an overall increase in violence across late 1964 and early 1965.[154] In particular, Front attacks against US installations such as airbases and barracks became more frequent. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to examine in detail the events that led President Johnson to commit US troops to South Vietnam in the first half of 1965. But what needs to be emphasised is that this commitment was

[151] John Carland, *Stemming the Tide,* Center of Military History, Washington D.C., 2000, pp. 12-13.
[152] Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State, 6 January 1965, *FRUS 1964-68*, II: 29.
[153] Nguyen, *Hanoi's War,* p. 74.
[154] Cosmas, *MACV: joint command in the years of escalation,* pp. 194-5.

based in part on the belief that the Republic of Vietnam was in danger of imminent military collapse. Colonel O.D. Jackson, then commander of the AATTV, had by early 1965 gained 'a very real impression, [that] the war was lost from a military point of view...I would have said that it was just a matter of weeks or months before the war militarily was lost in South Vietnam – it was as bad as that in my opinion, and a lot of people agreed with me.'[155] Among those who agreed were General Westmoreland and US Army Chief of Staff Harold Johnson, who both conveyed similar sentiments to President Johnson in March 1965.[156]

Therefore when US and Australian combat formations arrived in South Vietnam in mid-1965, their immediate task was to stabilise the military situation – putting 'fingers in the dike', as Westmoreland characterised it.[157] But the emphasis on 'conventional' military operations from both sides in 1965 does not mean, as some scholars later argued, that the insurgency in the countryside had become irrelevant.[158] On the contrary, it remained key to the conflict. Le Duan's GO-GU strategy demanded the existence of a politically active insurgent movement that could mobilise the populace to rise up against the government. Equally both the 'Young Turks' who seized control of the South Vietnamese government in early 1965 and senior US leadership under General Westmoreland understood the importance of pacification in creating a stable RVN that would be able to survive into the future.[159]

While not inevitable, the insurgency that began in the Republic of Vietnam after 1959 was the product not just of immediate political decisions but long-term social trends. Under French colonial rule Vietnamese society had become increasingly divided between a propertied elite and the rural majority.

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[155] Transcript of interview with BRIG Jackson by LTCOL R.F. Morrison, 9 March 1972, Sydney, p. 27; 2 AWM107.
[156] Carland, *Stemming the Tide,* p. 17.
[157] Msg, Westmoreland MAC 1463 to Wheeler, 17 March 1965, Westmoreland Message files, CMH, quoted in Carland, *Stemming the Tide,* p. 21.
[158] 'Conventional' in this instance refers to the attempted destruction of the enemy armed forces in open battle – war as it was understood classically in Western military thought.
[159] MACV Directive 525-4, 17 September 1965, subject: Tactics and Techniques for Employment of US Forces in the Republic of Vietnam, Westmoreland History files, 29 Aug-24 Oct 1965, US Army CMH, reproduced in Carland, 'Winning the War in Vietnam', pp. 557-558.

The former were able not only to exploit the latter economically through the mechanism of tenancy, but to solidify economic and political power at village level by coming to dominate traditional institutions such as the village council. From 1946 onwards the Communist-dominated Viet Minh movement was able to build support in rural areas by challenging this social order. Anticolonialist themes resonated in rural Vietnamese areas not solely because the populace was inherently patriotic but because colonialism had created this lopsided social order that harmed the majority of the population economically and politically. The Viet Minh provided for many a glimpse of a vastly more equitable alternative.

This alternative did not outlast the Geneva Agreements of 1954, which gave physical shape to the divides within Vietnamese politics. In the north, the Vietnamese Worker's Party-controlled Democratic Republic of Vietnam consolidated its position after eight years of war. In the south, pro-French colonialists and anti-French, anticommunist Nationalists regrouped. While Geneva succeeded in removing the overt French presence it did not answer the question of which political movement would rule a unified Vietnam. The refusal of Ngo Dinh Diem to hold the elections suggested by the Geneva Agreements ensured that any reunification would not be peaceful. Critically, despite this setback, many within the VWP – and in particular those associated with the southern wing of the Party – remained committed to reunification, even if by force.

Moreover, Geneva also resulted in a restoration of the old social order in rural areas in the south. Although Ngo Dinh Diem desired to build a new Vietnam, he could not escape the reality that the government itself was a legacy of the colonial period. His efforts to solve the grievances in the countryside either failed or exacerbated the problem. When in 1959 the VWP committed to a return to armed struggle in the south, it was able to generate popular support through once again challenging the existing social order. This was the key to understanding both the insurgency and the efforts to combat it – that, while the insurgency undoubtedly was controlled by a VWP leadership based in Hanoi, it

drew power from being able to exploit the legitimate grievances of much of the rural population.

Chapter 3. Pacification: an Introduction

In June 1961 Walt Rostow addressed the graduates of the US Army's Special Warfare Centre's counterinsurgency course in Fort Bragg, North Carolina. A former Professor of Economics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), Rostow was best known for his use of modernisation theory to explain the growth of newly emerged nations in Africa, Asia and Latin America. At first glance, the choice of an economist as commencement speaker for a group of elite soldiers from around the globe seemed incongruous. But as Michael Latham argues, Rostow was specifically chosen by the Kennedy Administration (which he had joined as Deputy National Security Adviser in 1960) to give the speech and make 'the connections between military strategy, counterinsurgency, and modernization explicit'.[160] Rostow was the public face of a generation of American policymakers who understood that the Communist-led insurgencies that had emerged throughout the decolonising world since 1945 were the product of deep political, social and economic change, and that defeating those insurgencies would require political, social and economic solutions. Yet these policymakers also believed, in a large part because of the work of Rostow and social scientists like him, that they had understood these changes and had the right solutions to the problems they caused. This attitude would profoundly shape pacification.

This chapter serves as primer on pacification: how it evolved, the problems it faced, and the administrative structure that grew up to implement it. It examines the ideological forces, such as modernisation theory, and the practical experience of counterinsurgency that helped shape attitudes towards pacification. It is important to understand this combination of the practical and

[160] Michael Latham, *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and "Nation Building": in tbe Kennedy Era,* University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 2000, p. 167. Latham also discusses Rostow's speech and its symbolism on pp. 1–2.

the theoretical because together they provided a framework for pacification, shaping it in certain ways. Both Vietnamese and American authorities believed that Vietnamese society would need to change if the Communist threat was to be defeated. What these changes were, and how these authorities believed they should be accomplished, is the subject of this chapter.

On 25 May 1961, President John F. Kennedy addressed a special joint session of the United States Congress. This speech is best remembered for Kennedy's commitment to put a man on the moon by the end of the decade, but President opened it on a much more sombre note. He drew his audience's attention to the 'rising peoples' of 'the whole southern half of the globe – Asia, Latin America, Africa and the Middle East.' The United States, Kennedy stated, supported the desire of these peoples to 'end to injustice, tyranny, and exploitation.' He cautioned, however, that the forces of Communism threatned to hijack this movement across the developing world. They would do so not through conventional armies but through 'guerrillas striking at night, by assassins striking alone', and pointed to the growing violence in Vietnam as an example. This was a challenge that the United States could not shirk, Kennedy warned.[161] He had in effect publically committed his Administration to winning the Cold War in the Third World.

Kennedy has been memorialised by historians as the driving force of this engagement with the developing world: the would-be counterinsurgent who saw combating the threat of guerrilla warfare as one of his most pressing policy challenges and who had to force his agenda on a reluctant and conservative military establishment.[162] But this ignores the fact that by the time Kennedy was elected in November 1960, the US government had been grappling with the problem of Communist subversion and insurgency in Asia for nearly fifteen years. Kennedy was more vocal about the threat posed by Communist

[161] John F. Kennedy, 'Special Message to the Congress on Urgent National Needs', May 25, 1961, placed online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*.
[162] Freedman, *Kennedy's Wars*, pp. 287–288. See also Douglas Blaufarb, *The Counterinsurgency Era,* The Free Press, New York, 1977, pp. 55–56 and Andrew Birtle, *US Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine 1942–1976,* Center of Military History, Washington D.C., 2006, pp. 223–229.

insurgency than his predecessor Dwight D. Eisenhower, but his interest was a product of existing US engagement with the problem.

This engagement had derived from the challenge faced by the US government in the immediate postwar period. The Second World War destabilised Europe and weakened the colonial system throughout Asia and Africa. US leaders began to warn of the challenges posed to the international order by the emergence of the developing world, eager to achieve the independence and material wealth of the West. 'More than half the people of the world are living in conditions approaching misery,' President Truman cautioned in his 1949 inaugural speech, and 'their poverty is a handicap and a threat both to them and to more prosperous areas.'[163] In Asia in particular, Americans worried about the political inclinations of a peasant majority emerging from European control. By the time Truman was delivering his speech in January 1949, India and Indonesia had both achieved independence and US advisers were assisting local forces in fighting Communist-led insurgencies in Korea, the Philippines, China and Indochina.[164]

The outbreak of these insurgencies and the potential for destabilisation throughout Latin America, Africa and Asia attracted the attention of both policymakers and social scientists, who collaborated in an effort to both understand the problem and devise solutions.[165] By the end of the 1950s, two alternative schools of thought had emerged: modernisation theory and community development. At its most basic, modernisation theory argued that societies were either 'traditional' or 'modern', that the progression from the former to the latter was basically linear, and that the progression of traditional societies could be sped up by exposing them to modern ones.[166] Key proponents of modernisation, notably Daniel Lerner and Walt Rostow, argued that the transition from traditional to modern caused dislocation within societies, and as urbanisation increased, economic patterns changed and demand for political

[163] Harry S. Truman, 'Inaugural Address', 20 January 1949, placed online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*.
[164] Cullather, *The Hungry World,* pp. 2–3; Birtle, *US Army Counterinsurgency,* p. 31.
[165] Latham, *Modernization as Ideology,* pp. 21–22.
[166] Latham, *Modernization as Ideology,* p. 4.

freedom grew. Communist movements would inevitably seek to exploit such dislocation; the key, both Lerner and Rostow argued, was to provide American help to developing nations to smooth as much as possible the transition into modernity.[167]

The appeal of modernisation theory to Americans during the Cold War is not hard to understand. As Michael Latham notes, works such as Rostow's '*The Stages of Economic Growth* made an immensely complex process suddenly simple'.[168] Where previously Americans had worried about their ability to understand and influence developing societies which they viewed as deeply alien, modernisation's assertion that all societies were simply at different stages of the same journey made them confident of the relevance of their expertise and answers. As David Ekbladh has pointed out, this imagery drew not only on lingering ideas of the 'white man's burden' in Asia and Manifest Destiny but also the experience of New Deal programs such as the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) within the United States. For many American policymakers, the success of the TVA and projects like it in dragging the American South into the industrial age was proof both of the power of government intervention and the validity of modernisation theory itself.[169]

The second school of thought, community development, eschewed modernisation's grand vision of rapidly urbanising societies in favour of an emphasis on gradual change within rural communities.[170] By focusing on small projects within individual villages, community development advocates believed they would address both the immediate needs of the villagers and give them agency in their own affairs. For policymakers, the appeal of community development was twofold. In the minds of many American officials, Cullather argued, 'the village was presumed to be the social unit that would mediate an explosive encounter between tradition and modernity, and consequently, it was

[167] Hemant Shah, *The Production of Modernization: Daniel Lerner, Mass Media, and the Passing of Traditional Society,* Temple University, Philadelphia, 2011, pp. 6–7; Freedman, *Kennedy's Wars*, pp. 29–30.
[168] Latham, *Modernization as Ideology,* p. 45.
[169] Ekbladh, *The Great American Mission*, p. 195–196.
[170] Miller, *Misalliance,* pp. 67-70 and Cullather, *The Hungry World,* p. 74

where the battle for Asia would be won.'[171] Focusing development efforts in villages therefore made sense. It also promised greater return for investment than the substantial infrastructure projects associated with modernisation theory, at a time when Congress did not look favourably upon the growing American aid budget. Community development thus became the centrepiece of the US aid effort in several countries during the late 1950s, most notably in India.[172]

Even as these two schools of thought were being conceived and refined, the US government and particular the US Army were gaining practical experience in fighting insurgencies. In the eight years in which President Truman occupied the White House, US military advisers played a key role in defeating Communist insurgencies in Greece (1947–49) and the Philippines (1945–1955), and both troops and advisers were involved in fighting Communist guerrillas in Korea (1946–1953). Despite the absence of relevant doctrine or institutional experience, 'US soldiers addressed the postwar insurgencies with surprising consistency'.[173] Advisers recognised that guerrillas exploited grievances in the countryside to gain support and that attempts to end insurgencies through purely military means would fail. Consequently, they pushed for political and economic reforms that would resolve these grievances while also taking measures in the short term to win the loyalty of the rural population.[174]

At the same time, advisers did not lose sight of the fact that insurgencies were a form of armed conflict. Effective military action to restore internal security was seen as a prerequisite for political and economic reform to take place.[175] In order to achieve this, advisers pushed their counterparts in the Greek and Filipino armies to abandon static, passive postures in favour of aggressive action designed to fix and destroy guerrilla units. Often this required significant reform within the armies concerned, as officers and men capable of

[171] Cullather, *The Hungry World,* p. 79.
[172] Miller, *Misalliance,* pp. 67-69.
[173] Birtle, *US Army Counterinsurgency,* p. 118.
[174] Birtle, *US Army Counterinsurgency*, p. 118.
[175] Birtle, *US Army Counterinsurgency*, pp. 118-119.

undertaking such operations were recruited, promoted and trained appropriately. In contrast to the image of a US Army obsessed with firepower and outlandish technical solutions, advisers saw the best means of hunting guerrillas as being traditional light infantry formations that could move quickly and effectively in broken terrain. Finally, despite their emphasis on mobile operations, advisers also recognised the importance of isolating guerrillas from their sources of supplies, intelligence and recruits among the civilian populace.[176]

The impressions US advisers took from their service in Greece, the Philippines and Korea were similar to those of other Western armies fighting insurgencies in the 1950s. Both Britain and France grappled with the issue of counterinsurgency as they retreated (willingly or unwillingly) from their empires. The writing of experts such as Sir Robert Thompson and David Galula, who served in Malaya and Algiers respectively, came to define counterinsurgent orthodoxy by the mid-1960s.[177]Although acknowledging that every campaign was different, these writers codified the basic principles – and in particular the need to win the support of the population and the need to isolate the insurgents from the population – that US advisers had learned in Greece and the Philippines. At a conference on counterinsurgency organised by the RAND Corporation in 1962, one British expert noted that the theories of the assembled British, Australian, French, American and Filipino experts 'were all essentially the same'.[178]

This can be confirmed by briefly examining the development of Australian counterinsurgency doctrine over the same period. From 1950 until 1963, Australian forces formed part of the British Commonwealth contingent that fought Communist guerrillas during the Malayan Emergency. Ian McNeill

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[176] Birtle, *US Army Counterinsurgency*, pp. 61–62.
[177] See Robert Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency: Experiences in Malaya and Vietnam,* Chatto & Windus, London, 1966, and David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice,* Praeger, Westport, 1964. For example of influence of Galula in Vietnam, see Gregor Mathias, *Galula in Algeria: Counterinsurgency Practice versus Theory,* Praeger, Santa Barbara, 2011, pp. 101–103.
[178] F.E. Kitson, *Bunch of Five,* Faber and Faber, London, 1977, pp. 200–201, quoted in Mathias, *Galula in Algeria,* p. 100.

has argued that during this period the Australian Army had little intellectual understanding of Maoist warfare, 'that the techniques of counter-revolutionary warfare were essentially similar to the jungle fighting that Australians had experienced in the South-West Pacific during the 1939–45 war', and that counterinsurgency was learned through experience in Malaya.[179] In 1962 the Army, having just dispatched a team of advisers to the Republic of Vietnam, moved to rectify this situation by producing a formal counterinsurgency (or Counter Revolutionary Warfare, as the Army then described it) doctrine. A team of British, Australian and New Zealand officers produce an initial treatment based on existing British doctrine and practical experience, 'Anti-Guerilla Operations in South-East Asia – Interim Tactical Doctrine', that would become the basis for the 1966 booklet *Counter Revolutionary Warfare,* published as part of the Army's official *The Division in Battle* doctrine.[180]

In its broad outline, *Counter Revolutionary Warfare* did not differ from similar publications being prepared in the US. The booklet made clear that 'the main part of the struggle is political' and that there was 'no purely military solution'.[181] It went on to emphasise that counterinsurgency could only be successful through winning the support of the population, and that this would be accomplished through a combination of population security and cultivation of 'an active minority'. One noticeable aspect of *Counter Revolutionary Warfare* was its strict delineation of the role military units would play. The booklet assumed that, as had been the case in Malaya, military operations would be directed by a joint civil-military command structure. Although it called for military units to conduct unconventional operations such as civic action and psychological operations, the primary mission remained the provision of security. In this sense *Counter Revolutionary Warfare* followed through the maxim that 'the main part of the struggle is political' to its logical conclusion. It assumed that military units would be working under direction from a political

[179] McNeill, *To Long Tan,* p. 15.
[180] McNeill, *To Long Tan,* p. 15.
[181] *The Division in Battle*, Pamphlet No. 11, *Counter Revolutionary Warfare*, Military Board, 1965, p. 25. The existing doctrine is *The Conduct of Anti-Terrorist Operations in Malaya,* Director of Operations, Malaya, 1958.

authority as part of a coherent strategy that integrated the political and security aspects of the struggle. This would not occur in practice in Phuoc Tuy, however.

By the time President Kennedy was elected in November 1960, therefore, something of a consensus existed within American circles as to the broad principles of counterinsurgency, and it was these principles that informed Administration policy in Vietnam from early 1961 onwards. Diem was presented with an American-authored national Counterinsurgency Plan that called for the burden of static security to be assumed by paramilitary and militia units, allowing ARVN units to find and destroy large Communist formations in their jungle base areas.[182] At the same time, Diem was urged to adopt political reforms designed to broaden the appeal of his government. Specific recommendations included the rationalisation of military chains of command through the appointment of a Minister of Defence, the appointment of some opposition figures to Cabinet, the disbanding of the Ngo's Can Lao Party, a loosening of press restrictions, greater power to the National Assembly, and greater anti-corruption efforts.[183]

Unsurprisingly, Diem and Nhu were unimpressed with these suggestions. As noted in the previous chapter, the Ngos had their own definite ideas on how best to address the challenge of insurgency in Vietnam. While they were committed to changing the nature of Vietnamese society in order to defeat the Communist threat, their vision of both the process and end result of that change was radically different to that of the Kennedy Administration. Indeed, it is a testament to how distant the Americans were from the thinking of their Vietnamese allies that they saw the Strategic Hamlet Program 'as a highly encouraging turn of events', despite so many of its core principles running at right angles to their own ideas of what constituted successful counterinsurgency.[184]

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[182] Blaufarb, *The Counterinsurgency Era,* p. 102 and Freedman, *Kennedy's Wars,* pp. 363–365.
[183] Ambassador in Vietnam (Durbrow) to the Department of State, 16 September 1960, *FRUS 1958–1960,* I: 576–578.
[184] Miller, *Misalliance,* pp. 239-240.

The differing perspectives on the Strategic Hamlet Program also helped obscure a fundamental problem within the US counterinsurgency paradigm – one that, as noted in the previous chapter, the Ngos themselves would confront during the implementation of the Strategic Hamlet Program. A State Department official, U. Alexis Johnson, summarised the basic problem in a 1962 article: 'The measures [of reform] we advocate may strike at the very foundation of those aspects of a country's social structure and domestic economy on which rest the basis of a government's control.'[185] In other words, would a governing class be prepared to reform itself out of power? This represented a potentially fatal flaw in the American counterinsurgency paradigm, and yet neither the Kennedy nor Johnson Administrations ever adequately addressed it.

Nor did the American prescriptions to restore internal security meet with the necessary levels of success. Kennedy consistently resisted suggestions to introduce US combat troops to Vietnam, instead hoping that a bigger, better trained and better supported Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF) would be able to defeat the NLF. As a result, the strength of the RVNAF steadily grew, from 247,700 in 1960 to 306,000 in 1961 and 397,400 in 1963.[186] The size and scope of the US advisory presence in Vietnam also changed, with the advisers present increasing from 746 in November 1961 to over 3,000 in June 1962.[187] Yet, as noted in the previous chapter, these increases did not lead to a clear improvement in the security situation. By 1963 US analysts were describing the security situation as a 'stalemate', with both sides increasing their armed strength but not gaining any real ground.[188]

Critics such as Andrew Krepinevich have argued that it was precisely because of the level of US assistance given to the RVNAF that the security situation failed to improve. The US Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) to Vietnam did not take counterinsurgency seriously and was convinced that

[185] U. Alexis Johnson, 'Internal Defense and the Foreign Service', *Foreign Service Journal,* July 1962, p. 23, quoted in Freedman, *Kennedy's Wars,* p. 292.
[186] Appendix VIII, *Pentagon Papers* Part IV B-3, p. 132.
[187] Appendix IX, *Pentagon Papers* Part IV B-3, p. 133.
[188] Birtle, '*Triumph Forsaken* as Military History', p. 134 and Miller, *Misalliance,* p. 249.

the primary threat lay in a conventional invasion from the north. Krepinevich argued that MAAG 'gave lip service to counterinsurgency doctrine' in public pronouncements while in practice emphasising conventional warfare to the South Vietnamese.[189] Lieutenant General McGarr, the commander of MAAG between September 1960 and February 1962, argued that the best way to defeat the insurgency was not population security but rather to undertake offensive operations aimed at destroying Front units. The organisation of the ARVN into American-style divisions, and MAAG resistance to the formation of specialised Ranger units designed to fight the NLF, provided further proof of advisers' corrosive intellectual rigidity. The US Army was so hidebound, Krepinevich argued, that it was simply unable to understand the threat posed by the NLF; its strategic response to the problem was to advocate invading the DRV.[190]

There is superficial truth to Krepinevich's criticisms. MAAG was concerned about the threat of invasion from the DRV, did urge ARVN commanders to act aggressively to find and destroy Front formations, and did (unsuccessfully) resist the formation of specialised units. But this was not thanks to the application of rigid orthodoxy but rather practical experience. US advisers were conscious of events a decade earlier in Korea, where the lightly armed and internal-security-focused ROK army had suddenly found itself facing an armoured invasion from the north.[191] While not dismissing the importance of counterinsurgency, they nonetheless believed that the ARVN had to be capable of fighting a conventional war. They did not see a problem in this dual tasking of the South Vietnamese force because, unlike contemporary observers such as Kennedy and later critics such as Krepinevich, they did not believe counterinsurgency lay outside the scope of traditional warfare. While tactical adjustments had been necessary, success in Greece and the Philippines had relied not on radical doctrinal change but the application of basic military principles such as aggressive, competent leadership and proper training. The

[189] Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam,* p. 57.
[190] Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam,* pp. 57–58, 62.
[191] Birtle, *US Army Counterinsurgency,* pp. 311–312.

creation of specialised units was simply gimmickry that would, through the siphoning off of the best soldiers, weaken the rest of the army.[192]

Moreover, as Ronald Spector notes, the charges that the RVNAF lacked appropriate counterinsurgent training missed the point, as 'the Vietnamese Army's lack of proficiency in basic combat skills was often so low as to make the question of specialised training irrelevant.'[193] The unpreparedness of the RVNAF to fight the insurgency had deep roots. Correctly recognising that a unified and effective Army would be a potential threat to his political control, Diem promoted officers on the basis of political loyalty rather than competence. He also created a 'system of divided authority, routine insubordination and overlapping responsibility', playing officers off against each other 'to ensure that no military leader became too powerful'.[194] This relentless politicisation of the officer corps eroded professionalism and competency. Advisers also noted the Ngos' willingness to 'shoot the messenger', a tendency that naturally encouraged officers to hide bad news. The end result of these trends was the creation of an environment in which reform-minded officers struggled to gain traction, in turn making it difficult for the basic problems afflicting the RVNAF to be addressed.[195]

The existence of these structural barriers to improvement also called into question the effectiveness of the advisory model. Some members of the Kennedy Administration, notably Maxwell Taylor, hoped that an expanded advisory presence would galvanise the RVNAF by delivering help directly to junior officers and the men they lead.[196] But this assumed that the advisory relationship was one of teacher-pupil, when in reality it was considerably more complex. Advisers did not fit into military hierarchies and could only advise, rather than order, their counterparts. Success for advisers demanded the cultivation of strong personal relationships with counterparts, but this was a

[192] Ronald H. Spector, *Advice and Support: the early years of the United States Army in Vietnam, 1941-1960,* Free Press, New York, 1985, pp. 349–351.
[193] Spector, *Advice and Support,* p. 378.
[194] Spector, *Advice and Support,* p. 378.
[195] Spector, *Advice and Support,* p. 378.
[196] *Pentagon Papers* Part IV B-3, pp. 30–31.

task made difficult by the advisers' transitory presence. Advisers were expected, often with an only rudimentary introduction to Vietnamese culture and language, to build these relationships and implement lasting change within the space of a year before leaving Vietnam. Unsurprisingly, many struggled to achieve this goal.[197] Somewhat ironically, MACV's institutional culture obscured this struggle. Spector described 'the dogged "Can Do" attitude of most officers and non-commissioned officers who tended to see all faults in the army as correctable, all failures as temporary' as contributing to 'overoptimistic reports'.[198]

The attitude of MACV advisers, that the answers to the problems within Vietnam were known and all that was needed for success was effort, coloured the entire American attitude to pacification. In his May 1961 letter to Kennedy, Vice President Johnson argued:

> The basic problem in Viet Nam is not very different than it is for all of the nations of the region. The ordinary people need decent houses. They need schools. They need better conditions of health. They need the productive industries, the thriving agriculture and the safe and adequate transportation and communications which will make all of these things possible. They need an understanding government which is close to them and in which they feel a stake.[199]

Johnson's characterisation of 'the basic problem' illustrates the way in which Americans projected their own experience on to Vietnam. The problems stemming from the existing rural social order such as land ownership, corruption and repression were ignored, replaced by the problems that the New Deal had tried to solve. As experience in Phuoc Tuy would show, villagers appreciated the increases in material prosperity that Johnson spoke of providing. But a richer inequitable system was still inequitable.

The issue of land tenure is particularly revealing. Americans had pushed Diem to begin land reform as soon as he assumed power, and to that end

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[197] Spector, *Advice and Support,* pp. 378–379, Birtle, *US Army Counterinsurgency,* pp. 347–348.
[198] Spector, *Advice and Support,* p. 379.
[199] Paper prepared by the Vice President, undated, *FRUS 1961–1963,* 1: 150.

appointed the architect of the successful reform in postwar Japan, Wolf Ladejinsky, as an adviser to the South Vietnamese President.[200] Yet despite the failure of Diem's initial program, land tenure gained little further attention from the Kennedy Administration or Americans in Vietnam as the insurgency began. The climb in rice production between 1955 and 1960 was seen as a proof that land reform had been effective, a view that emphasised American predisposition to see the economic issues as revolving around growth rather than equity. In a letter to Walt Rostow written in February 1961, Ladejinsky noted the 'seeming contradiction between widespread insurgency on the one hand and economic progress on the other'. Ladejinsky took this situation as proof that 'economic well-being is only a limited factor in assuring the political stability of a country' and that 'we have tended to exaggerate the significance of a full rice-bowl as a means to that end'.[201] He was half-right: by seeing economic issues as being defined by needs rather than wants, Americans did overstate the significance of a full rice-bowl. For many farmers, the issue was not how much rice there was but how it was distributed.

Only as the insurgency continued to worsen did American officials begin to highlight 'that rent control is a dead letter, that free land from the VC [Viet Cong] is more attractive than land for sale from the GVN, and that the GVN tends to represent landlords more than peasants'.[202] The same US official's effort to emphasise the importance of land tenure in an August 1962 memo is unintentionally revealing: 'All this to-do about a land reform program which Diem thinks is completed is important *because the Communists have apparently made some yardage simply by being against landlords* [my emphasis]'.[203] Yet this growing realisation failed to translate into any political action. From 1962 until the fall of the Diem government in November 1963, the Strategic Hamlet Program dominated pacification planning, and other issues and programs

[200] Ambassador in Vietnam (Reinhardt) to the Department of State, 15 June 1955, *FRUS 1955–1957* 1: 455–458
[201] Ladejinsky to Rostow, 24 February 1961, Series 6, President's Office Files, Presidential Papers, Papers of John F. Kennedy, Kennedy Library.
[202] Memorandum From the Deputy Director of the Vietnam Working Group (Heavner) to the Director (Wood), 3 August 1962, *FRUS 1961–1963,* 2: 572.
[203] Memorandum From the Deputy Director of the Vietnam Working Group (Heavner) to the Director (Wood), 3 August 1962, *FRUS 1961–1963,* 2: 572.

became secondary to it. The growing political crisis surrounding Diem and the instability that followed his assassination made any national reform program impossible to implement.

The US response to the Strategic Hamlet Program also shows how pre-existing models dominated American thinking regarding pacification. Although initially surprised by the emergence of a nationwide pacification effort that they had had no input into, US officials quickly threw their support behind the program.[204] Their enthusiasm stemmed not only from the fact that the Strategic Hamlet Program was the kind of comprehensive counterinsurgency plan that they had been pushing for since 1960 but also from their view of the program as an instrument of modernisation. For the Americans, the strategic hamlets were a pipeline through which technical assistance and material aid could flow, pushing Vietnamese rural society from the traditional into the modern. 'The theme needs to be what the Government can do to help the people (together with their own efforts) and not what the people should do for the Government,' one Embassy report complained.[205] As Latham put it, once villagers had seen the material benefits that the central government provided, their '"traditional" obligations of filial piety in the formerly isolated, largely autonomous village would be replaced by a "modern" loyalty to the specifically South Vietnamese nation'.[206]

Although pacification remained a nominal priority after the assassination of Diem, the political instability of the Republic and the disastrous security situation meant little was accomplished in 1964 and 1965. Throughout this period, as Ahern notes, 'responsibility for the development of a comprehensive counterinsurgency effort continued to rest, in practice, with the Americans'.[207] In 1964 two major American-planned pacification campaigns, *Chien Tang* ('Will to Victory') and *Hop Tac* ('Victory'), simply petered out thanks

[204] Catton, *Diem's Final Failure,* pp. 141–142.
[205] Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State, 23 March 1962, *FRUS 1961–1963,* 2: 269.
[206] Latham, *Modernization as Ideology,* p. 180.
[207] Ahern, *Vietnam Declassified,* p. 125.

to a lack of interest on the part of the Vietnamese.[208] Paying lip service to the wishes of their American patrons, the Khanh regime appointed Nguyen Ton Hoan as Deputy Prime Minister for pacification, but Hoan grew so frustrated with his lack of control over his portfolio that he eventually resigned and went into voluntary exile.[209] By the time Khanh left power in February 1965, 'the political and military situation in Vietnam was nearly totally inimical to pacification'.[210] For the next twelve months, pacification would remain in limbo as Vietnamese and newly-arrived US forces concentrated on restoring security and the new Ky-Thieu government consolidated its power in Saigon.

Critically, the proposals for this 'comprehensive counterinsurgency effort' that emerged in 1964 continued to flow from the same formula that the Kennedy Administration had been applying to Vietnam for the previous three years. Although in the immediate aftermath of the fall of Diem a degree of self-appraisal occurred within the US government, there was no real questioning of the basic assumptions that underpinned pacification. The obvious problems such as insufficient administrative capacity and improper use of government troops that had hampered the Strategic Hamlet Program, *Chien Tang* and *Hop Tac,* helped obscure deeper questions. During the implementation of the Strategic Hamlet Program a handful of officials did raise concerns that little reliable data existed concerning peasant motivations and expectations. 'The basic question of the whole war,' Roger Hilsman and Michael Forrestal wrote to President Kennedy in January 1963, 'is again the attitude of the villagers. It is difficult, if not impossible, to assess how the villagers really feel and the only straws in the wind point in different directions.'[211] Despite this lack of firm evidence, the orthodox picture of a peasant liable to be wooed by the material bounty of modernity persisted. For the Americans the lesson of 1964 and 1965 was that it was not the pacification model, but its implementation, that needed to improve.

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[208] Hunt, *Pacification,* p. 28.
[209] Ahern, *Vietnam Declassified,* p. 125.
[210] Hunt, *Pacification,* p. 30.
[211] Memorandum From the Director of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research (Hilsman) and Michael V. Forrestal of the National Security Council Staff to the President, 25 January 1963, *FRUS 1961–1963,* 3: 51.

President Lyndon B. Johnson would revive pacification from its moribund state. At a time when policymakers within the US government were wrestling with the appropriate way to achieve US objectives, Johnson made pacification a key part of US strategy. Victory in Vietnam, Johnson argued, would be defined not in narrow military or political terms but by the emergence of a modern Vietnamese state that would stand as a beacon for the rest of Southeast Asia. In February 1966 Johnson hosted a conference in Honolulu specifically devoted to the economic, social and political – rather than military – aspects of the war. In a closing address to an audience that included Prime Minister Nguyen Cao Ky, Chief of State Nguyen Van Thieu and their pacification chief General Nguyen Duc Thang, Johnson made clear the importance he attached to progress in pacification:

> Preserve this communiqué…it will be a kind of bible that we are going to follow. When we come back here 90 days from now, or six months from now…we are going to give you an examination and the finals will be just on what you have done…democracy in rural areas…large outputs, more efficient production to improve credit, handicraft, light industry, rural electrification – are those just phrases, high-sounding words, or have you coonskins on the wall?[212] [original emphasis]

As the *Pentagon Papers* noted, 'The President's remarks candidly indicated the type of pressure and the expectations that he had for the effort.'[213]

Johnson's influence on pacification was twofold. Whereas Kennedy had been fascinated with counterinsurgency, his successor was fascinated by development. As an ambitious young politician in Texas in the 1930s Johnson had built his career on the back of the New Deal, in particular the electrification of his largely rural constituency. In a narrow sense, this demonstration of the way that political support could flow from material gain influenced Johnson's attitude towards pacification policy. But Johnson also genuinely believed in the modernisation creed that once external intervention broke the shackles of

[212] *Pentagon Paper* Part IV C-8, p. 41.
[213] *Pentagon Paper* Part IV C-8, p. 42.

poverty, societies could be transformed into engines of progress.[214] This was a theme he constantly stressed in both his time as Vice President and subsequently as President. As a result, Johnson pushed a vision of pacification that resembled a militarised New Deal. 'I want to have a war to build as well as destroy,' he told National Security Adviser Robert Komer in April 1966. 'So I want to put you in charge of generating a massive effort to do more for the people of South Vietnam, particularly the farmers in the rural areas, and your mandate will be a very extensive one.'[215]

Johnson's 'massive effort' came to encompass virtually all of the activities of the Republic of Vietnam. As noted earlier, no comprehensive definition of pacification exists. MACV's attempt, however, published in 1968, gives some idea of the just how broad pacification became under the Johnson Administration:

> Pacification is the military, political, economic and social process of establishing or re-establishing local government responsive to and involving the participation of the people. It includes the provision of sustained, credible territorial security, the destruction of the enemy's underground movement, the assertion or re-assertion of political control and involvement of the people in government, and the initiation of economic and social activity capable of self-sustenance and expansion.[216]

As ARVN Brigadier Tran Dinh Tho noted in a postwar assessment:

> Defined as such, pacification is a broad and complex strategic concept which encompasses many fields of national endeavour…pacification appears to have involved every American serviceman and civilian who served [in South Vietnam].[217]

Tran's comment was clearly intended as a joke, but it contained a kernel of truth – that while pacification was centred on the struggle in rural Vietnam, Johnson's

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[214] Cullather, *The Hungry World,* pp. 211-213. Ekblad, *The Great American Mission,* pp. 205–206

[215] Robert Komer Trial Testimony, quoted in Frank Leith Jones, *Blowtorch,: Robert Komer, Vietnam and American Cold War Strategy,* Maryland Naval Institute Press, Annapolis, 2013. p. 94.

[216] *Handbook for Military Support of Pacification,* Headquarters MACV, San Francisco, 1968, p. 1. It is quoted without attribution in Tran Dinh Tho, *Pacification,* US Army Centre of Military History, Washington D.C., 1977, p. ii.

[217] Tran Dinh Tho, *Pacification,* p. ii.

conception of the program as a massive state building effort meant that everything from elections to macroeconomics was relevant.

Johnson's second area of influence was in creating pacification's administrative structure. In 1965 the Ky and Thieu government had appointed General Nguyen Duc Thang, widely considered by American advisers to be one of the most capable officers in the ARVN, as the Minister for Rural Development. Thang was also given control of a number of other agencies and areas, making him in effect the head of pacification within the South Vietnamese government.[218] Much to Johnson's chagrin, no equivalent post existed for the US government. Responsibility for advising and funding individual pacification programs were scattered across the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the United States Information Service (USIS), the CIA, and MACV. No single entity was responsible for pacification support, with the result that all involved 'had failed to articulate a doctrine of rural pacification or a comprehensive plan for South Vietnam'.[219]

Johnson took a number of steps to address this perceived failure. He appointed Robert Komer as his special representative for pacification in April 1966, with a mandate to investigate ways to improve pacification performance. Komer, who quickly earned the nickname 'Blowtorch' for his willingness to pressure recalcitrant officials, recommended centralising the responsibility for pacification support under MACV, a proposal Johnson favoured. But significant resistance from the civilian agencies concerned prompted Johnson to scale down his plans, instead forming the Office of Civil Operations (OCO) under Ambassador Porter, in November 1966.[220] The OCO encompassed all civilian programs and was under the control of the United States Overseas Mission (USOM); Porter functioned as Lodge's deputy. Although promising much, the OCO was virtually dead on arrival, killed by a mixture of Embassy and CIA indifference. A frustrated Johnson responded by returning to Komer's original

[218] James McAllister, 'What Can One Man Do? Nguyen Duc Thang and the Limits of Reform in South Vietnam', *Journal of Vietnamese Studies,* Vol. 4, No. 2, 2009, pp.124–125.
[219] Ahern, *Vietnam Declassified*, p. 181.
[220] Jones, *Blowtorch*, p. 118.

proposal; in May 1967 the office of Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support was formed as a department of MACV, with the head of the office reporting to General Westmoreland. Despite being a civilian, Komer was given the job.[221]

CORDS represented a significant step forward in both the management and conception of pacification. The reorganisation created a headquarters that was responsible for the creation of a unified pacification plan, and a clear chain of command to allow for implementation of the plan. Advisers in the field were reorganised into provincial teams under the command of a Province Senior Adviser (PSA). The PSA, who usually held the rank of Lieutenant Colonel, was able to coordinate province-wide responses to particular problems across both military and civil fields, and implement the pacification plans that began to flow from Komer's headquarters. The first of these, Project TAKEOFF, demonstrated some of the immediate advantages of unifying the American effort. Komer conceived of TAKEOFF as a 'crash effort' that would improve pacification results in the short term, setting the stage for a more considered approach in 1968. Both Thieu and Ky were too absorbed in the 1967 Presidential Election to pay much attention to pacification, however, and TAKEOFF gained little traction within the South Vietnamese government. Nonetheless, the presence of a unified advisory system allowed CORDS to bypass this Vietnamese inertia by having advisers leverage their counterparts at district and province level to implement some of TAKEOFF's components. Although not a total success, TAKEOFF showed not only how CORDS improved American leverage but also the central role it would assume in driving pacification itself.[222]

Treating pacification as a management problem reflected the way in which the limits of US control shaped the program as a whole. While Americans conceived much of the pacification program, its implementation, for both practical and political reasons, lay primarily with the Vietnamese. As past experience showed, this implementation was not always to a standard that

[221] Hunt, *Pacification,* pp. 86–88; Jones, *Blowtorch,* pp. 126–129.
[222] Hunt, *Pacification,* p. 100, pp. 105–106.

satisfied American advisers. Faced with this situation and with only limited leverage, US officials in both Washington and Saigon looked to improve performance through areas they could control. Komer's appointment in April 1966 reflected this; as Frank Jones notes, 'Komer understood his mandate as a management problem subject to analysis, an input-output model, concepts he had learned at the Harvard Business School.'[223] More broadly, as Richard Hunt argues, 'management and organization problems were notions familiar to Americans in government and the military and were seemingly acultural, comprehensible to Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese alike'.[224] Here was the 'can do' spirit shining through again – in the technocratic managerial culture of 1960s America, all problems could be solved if properly quantified and managed.

Yet no amount of managerial finesse would answer the basic questions that had confronted the pacification program since it had begun. Was the American model, with its modernisation and liberal democracy, appropriate and feasible? Would the South Vietnamese elite acquiesce to a program of reform that threatened their social position? Could the South Vietnamese overcome structural weaknesses such as corruption and lack of administrative capacity? Did the Vietnamese and American governments have the same understanding of what pacification was and, if not, could these two views be reconciled? In an ironic twist, it would be the flagship pacification program of the Johnson era that forced many of these questions to be confronted. The rise and fall of the Revolutionary Development cadre would come to symbolise the contradictions within pacification and the problems in implementing the modernisation vision.

Revolutionary Development grew out of a local initiative in Quang Ngai province that began in 1963. Members of the Popular Forces whose political sympathies lay with the nationalist VNQDD party were recruited by a local police chief into a platoon-size commando team. This team then entered

[223] Jones, *Blowtorch*, p. 101.
[224] Hunt, *Pacification*, p. 81.

contested hamlets, earning the trust of local villagers by living alongside them and performing basic civic action duties such as repairing roofs or digging wells. The fact the team was armed allowed it not only to defend itself against any Front attack but also to act on intelligence provided by villagers won over by the civic action. By the end of 1964 this approach was working so well that the team was inflicting casualties on the local NLF at eight times the rate of other Territorial Forces in the province.[225]

This was a program firmly in the tradition of previous CIA-sponsored efforts, and newly installed CIA Chief of Station De Silva returned from a visit to Quang Ngai in November 1964 looking 'as if he had found God'.[226] De Silva became an aggressive advocate of the program, christened the People's Action Teams (PAT), pushing for its adoption at a national level. Unusually, he found support in both Saigon and MACV.[227] The MACV J-3 (Chief of Operations), General William DePuy, was won over by the performance of PATs in the field and believed the Vietnamese Army lacked the political sensibilities to manage a pacification program effectively. In Saigon, the newly entrenched Ky/Thieu government also displayed a keen interest in the program and in November 1965 implemented Decree No. 1900 UBHB-CT, which formally enshrined the PATs as the RVN's leading pacification program – one of the few times such a major step was taken without prodding from Washington.[228]

Ahern notes that the PAT concept generated enthusiasm in Saigon in part because, in the dark days of 1964, US and Vietnamese officials were prepared to embrace any program that worked. Yet from the outset, the program suffered from conceptual problems. De Silva promoted the program as a sort of pro-government guerrilla movement that could enter villages, win the trust of the peasants, drive out the local NLF, and eventually bring the area under government control. But when elaborating on the specifics of how PATs operated and how they were judged to be successful, De Silva talked solely in

[225] Ahern, *Vietnam Declassified*, pp. 149–150.
[226] Ahern, *Vietnam Declassified*, p. 149.
[227] A slightly different perspective on the origins of the People's Action Team is provided in McNeill, *The Team,* pp. 379–385.
[228] Ahern, *Vietnam Declassified*, p. 180; Hunt, *Pacification,* p. 36.

terms of their military utility against the NLF.[229] No metric existed, in other words, to measure the political aspects of the program.

This did not go unnoticed, and both General Westmoreland and CIA officer William Colby raised concerns about the program's validity. Although Westmoreland approved of the general concept, he argued that this is what the existing Popular Forces should have been doing in the first place, and that the PATs represented an unnecessary duplication of effort that would strain an already overstretched South Vietnamese manpower pool. Colby, in contrast, believed the PATs looked to be an effective tool for 'the neutralization and elimination of the VC infrastructure', but noted that they did 'not provide for the replacement of the infrastructure by positive local political institutions to prevent VC re-infiltration and subversion'.[230] This question, as to how a PAT could turn short-term military advantage into long-term political gain, would not be answered. Caught up in the enthusiasm of this 'revolutionary' project, US and Vietnamese officials continued to push for its expansion. By January 1966, 19,000 cadre from pre-existing programs had been consolidated into PATs, each organised into 59-man teams: a 30-man protection platoon and a number of three- to five-man sections that specialised in areas such as medicine or propaganda.[231] A CIA-backed training centre was set up in Vung Tau to maintain the flow of cadre. By the end of 1966 there were over 350 teams in the field, with Komer aggressively pushing for another training centre to be opened in the Long Hai hills in Phuoc Tuy to more than double the annual graduation rate from 19,000 to 39,000.[232] Although these efforts came to nothing, the program was still enthusiastically endorsed at Honolulu by senior US leadership. It was here too that the program received a new name: Revolutionary Development.

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[229] Ahern, *Vietnam Declassified*, p. 156-158.
[230] William E. Colby, memorandum to the director of Central Intelligence, 'Implications of Saigon Station Experiment in Counterinsurgency,' 24 November 1964, job 78-597R, box 1, folder 9, quoted in Ahern, *Vietnam Declassified*, p. 154.
[231] Chester L. Cooper et al, *The American Experience with Pacification in Vietnam, Vol. III: History of Pacification*, p. 286.Institute for Defense Analysis, Arlington, 1972, p. 286.
[232] Ahern, *Vietnam Declassified*, p. 189.

The use of the 'Revolutionary Development' (RD) name illustrated the growing divide between US expectations for the program and the realities in the field. The name came not from the Vietnamese but from Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, who suggested it to Ky as a way 'to make clear to the world [the RVN's] devotion to the ideals of the Honolulu Conference'.[233] Ky readily acceded to the name – in English. In Vietnamese the program continued to be known, like its parent Ministry, as Rural Construction or Rural Development. The difference readily demonstrated the drift between American and Vietnamese perceptions. For Lodge and US leadership, the RD cadre (RDC) would push into the countryside and, in Lodge's words, 'saturate the minds of the people with some socially conscious and attractive ideology, which is susceptible to being carried out'.[234] But the Vietnamese use of 'rural' clearly demonstrated that their senior leadership 'do not visualise the program as essentially revolutionary', as one American observed, instead seeing it as an 'opportunity for economic development and a channel for the injection of large quantities of American aid'.[235]

This tension, between the theoretical goals of a 'revolutionary' program intended to transform society and the reality of a program in which the senior leadership was not interested in any sort of genuine change, was reflected in events at the training centre in Vung Tau. The man initially appointed as head of the cadre program was Lieutenant Colonel Tran Ngoc Chau. As the province chief of Kien Hoa, Chau had impressed CIA officers during 1963–64 with his sophisticated responses to the insurgency. Unlike many of his ARVN contemporaries, Chau saw the insurgency as a political problem whose solution lay in winning the allegiance of the peasantry. Chau brought this perspective to his new role, but after just eight months in the position he resigned to pursue a career in politics. Chau complained that General Thang did not understand the political dimension of RD and saw it simply as a mechanism to pump money into villages.

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[233] Ahern, *Vietnam Declassified*, p. 187.
[234] Bergerud, *The Dynamics of Defeat*, p. 141.
[235] Ahern, *Vietnam Declassified*, p. 188.

His successor, Colonel Nguyen Be, shared a similar view and fared little better. Be produced a manifesto, *Contribution to the Vietnamese People's Struggle or Solution to the Vietnam War*, that did succeed in outlining the sort of revolutionary vision that had been talked about since Honolulu. Be's diagnosis of the causes of the insurgency as underdevelopment and lack of security among the peasantry were hardly original, but his solutions most certainly were.[236] Noted as being xenophobic even by Vietnamese standards, Be argued that the urban and intellectual classes had been hopelessly compromised by foreign and colonial influence, to the point of being no longer truly Vietnamese. Thus any revival of the Vietnamese people had to spring from the countryside:

> After the family, the hamlet represents the purest Vietnamese culture we can find. People in the hamlet avoided foreign influence to live a leisurely, quiet existence behind their green bamboo fences; they possessed the spirit of self-reliance and contentment; they gave little or no thought to the wealth or convenience of a foreign civilization.[237]

Be's idealised Vietnamese village was not just a nostalgic look at the past; it formed the basis for the renewed nation. Be called for the RVN to become a constitutional democracy in which the hamlet became the basic political unit, electing one representative to parliament. This meant the RD program – which Be envisioned being, in practical terms, a reconstruction of individual hamlets – would be absolutely critical in achieving this renewal.

Be's plan, written in September 1967, represented the closest Revolutionary Development would ever come to articulating the 'attractive ideology' that the program was supposedly based around. Yet in doing so, he highlighted the fundamentally broken nature of the Revolutionary Development concept. Be's plan represented an assault on the existing South Vietnamese government that was every bit as comprehensive as that of the Communists; this was naturally unacceptable to those in a position of power. As Thomas Ahern argued, 'Be had, in effect, presumed to translate "Revolutionary

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[236] Nguyen Be, *Contribution to the Vietnamese People's Struggle or Solution to the Vietnam War*, undated; 87 AWM314.
[237] Nguyen Be, *Contribution to the Vietnamese People's Struggle*, undated, p. 3; AWM314 87,

Development" into Vietnamese, and the disquieting implications of this effort had to be, and were, simply ignored.'[238]

This undercutting of one of the key premises was rapidly followed by the unravelling of most of the original concept. As Robert Komer later admitted, 'the 59-man teams by themselves could not provide either adequate security or stay long enough in the hamlet before moving on'.[239] Although many teams would prove during the Tet Offensive that they could defend themselves adequately, they could not provide security for the hamlet or village as a whole and tended to bunker down within their own compounds – in essence replicating the government posture in the countryside that the program had been created to overturn. This could at least in part be blamed on poor leadership within the teams, which was later described as 'inadequate' and 'very spotty' by Komer.[240] A growing manpower crisis had conspired to drain the already shallow pool of motivated South Vietnamese leadership, a trend exacerbated by the failure of Colonel Be's training program to 'prepare RD cadre psychologically or technically for operations in exposed or insecure areas in the field'.[241] One of the results was a soaring desertion rate that further undercut the effectiveness of the program.

Although RD cadre would remain funded until 1971, the program's core mission disappeared in 1968. In the aftermath of the Tet Offensive, Komer successfully lobbied for the emphasis of the teams to be shifted away from security to village development and political action. Teams were moved into hamlets rated secure under the HES system and ordered to focus on these tasks – dramatically shifting the RD program from the leading to the trailing edge of pacification. In 1969 this was compounded when, recognising the redundancy of the existing structure of RD teams, the Ministry of Rural Development split them in two, creating teams of 30 men apiece. These teams consisted of one 6-man control group and four 8-man cells. Their focus was on providing technical

[238] Ahern, *Vietnam Declassified*, pp. 234-235.
[239] Robert Komer, *Organisation and Management of the "New Model" Pacification Program 1966-69*, RAND, Santa Monica, 1970, p. 133.
[240] Komer, *Organisation and Management of the "New Model" Pacification Program*, p. 140.
[241] Komer, *Organisation and Management of the "New Model" Pacification Program*, p. 140.

support for the Village Self-Development program, organising local People's Self Defence Forces, and assisting in hamlet and village council elections.[242] Although a valuable service, it was a far cry from the program's initial aims, and it ended by being cut because of a funding shortfall in 1971.[243]

The story of the Revolutionary Development program shows in a microcosm the broader problems facing pacification. The program's transformation from local initiative into nationwide effort within the space of eighteen months is instructive of the way in which, in the face of seemingly imminent Communist victory, short-term gain was prioritised over long-term planning. Although the issues that ultimately doomed the program were identified early on, Revolutionary Development gained traction because US and Vietnamese officials were willing to gamble on any program producing immediate results.

This also brought into question the philosophy underpinning Revolutionary Development as a whole. Although framed as a transformative program, in practice Revolutionary Development was simply another way of simultaneously delivering material aid to villages to win peasant loyalty and killing Viet Cong. The interest of Ky and Thieu lay in building a rural constituency that would solidify their political position rather than genuinely reforming government in South Vietnam. The handful of Vietnamese officers who embraced RD as a vehicle for genuine change were sidelined or ignored, largely because they followed the idea of 'revolutionary change' through to its natural conclusion. The result was a program whose utility was always, in hindsight, dubious, and which gradually reduced in importance as modernist dreams of a reborn South Vietnam faded after 1968.

By the time 1ATF arrived in Phuoc Tuy in May 1966, therefore, much of what would constitute pacification in a theoretical and practical sense had been settled on. This chapter has shown that, contrary to the image of the aloof and

[242] For further detail on these concepts see Chapter 8, 'Déjà vu, All Over Again'.
[243] Cooper et al, *The American Experience with Pacification in Vietnam*, p. 292.

ignorant American diplomats portrayed in works such as *The Ugly American,* the US government did pay considerable attention to the problem of insurgencies in the decolonising world and the socioeconomic conditions that they emerged from. US Army personnel served as advisers in fighting counterinsurgencies in Greece, the Philippines, Korea and elsewhere, often acting as *de facto* commanders. At the same time, a generation of social scientists, convinced that they could quantify societies' most complex problems – perhaps even societies themselves – turned their attention to the question of why developing nations faced instability. The result of this was that by the time the Kennedy Administration confronted the decline of security in the RVN and the rise of the NLF in 1960–61, it had a significant body of theory and practice to draw on regarding counterinsurgency.

Yet this chapter has also shown that this body of knowledge served to obscure as much as to clarify. Convinced of the continued relevance of their previous counterinsurgency solutions, US officials and policymakers overlooked or minimised issues driving support for the NLF in the countryside. Just as rural Americans had responded to the largesse of the New Deal in the 1930s and 1940s, so too would rural Vietnamese respond to programs aimed at increasing their overall prosperity. Yet this ignored that the Front successfully generated support among rural peasants not because it promised a bigger pie, but because it promised to distribute the pie more fairly. As noted in the previous chapter, support for the insurgency was overwhelmingly the product of the existing social order, which concentrated both wealth and political power in the hands of a landed elite. Changing this situation was crucial to defeating the insurgency, but because of existing preconceptions little was done to achieve this aim.

This failure to accurately identify the key grievances in rural Vietnamese society also pointed to the existence of deeper problems with pacification. Did the South Vietnamese government, dominated as it was by the landed and military elite, have the courage or vision to reform itself? Between 1960 and 1966, questions of this nature were occasionally raised, but rarely answered. The combination of fear about the government's precarious position in the

countryside and a 'can do' institutional culture meant few American or Vietnamese officials were interested in exploring these long-term questions, favouring instead solutions that promised quick results. The Revolutionary Development program was an obvious example of this – what started as a localised initiative to increase the effectiveness of government security forces was rapidly expanded into the centrepiece of the renewed pacification effort, with little real thought as to how it would achieve its new objectives.

Chapter 4. Phuoc Tuy in 1966

In March 1966 General John Wilton, the Australian Chief of the General Staff, and Colonel O.D. Jackson, Commander Australian Forces Vietnam (COMAFV) and 1ATF commander designate, took a helicopter ride over Phuoc Tuy. Jackson pointed out to Wilton a small hill that lay a few kilometres to the north of the province's central populated area. On landing, Wilton gave a brief acknowledgement to one of his staff officers before moving on to other matters. So was decided both the operating area for 1ATF and the location of its headquarters. The Australians would be based at Nui Dat, in the province of Phuoc Tuy.[244] Phuoc Tuy received Wilton's approval because it met the Australian government's criteria. The province was strategically important because it controlled access to Vung Tau, South Vietnam's largest port after Saigon. It also offered the opportunity for something of a 'self-contained' war, ensuring operational independence for 1ATF.[245] Yet this emphasis on Phuoc Tuy's strategic location meant that the Australians were comparatively ignorant of the complex battlefield they were entering. Phuoc Tuy was not a big place, but contained a diverse range of communities shaped by economic circumstance, religion, ethnicity and geography. This diversity meant that individual villages and hamlets responded to the policies of the RVN and Front in different ways, creating an environment that demanded a sophisticated and varied pacification response.

The purpose of this chapter is twofold. First, it provides a detailed description of Phuoc Tuy's political and physical geography. It does so in order to make the reader familiar with the province itself, to show the particular circumstances of individual villages and hamlets, and to introduce the Front and RVN units that would fight the war in Phuoc Tuy. This is something that has only been sketched in existing accounts, yet is critical to understanding how

[244] Greg Lockhart, *The Minefield,* Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, 2007, pp. 24–25.
[245] McNeill, *To Long Tan,* pp. 194-197.

pacification unfolded. Secondly, it shows how the grievances that fuelled support for the insurgency and are outlined in Chapter 1, such as land tenure and government corruption, translated to a local level. These grievances certainly existed in Phuoc Tuy, but they did not necessarily have the same traction as in other areas. Land tenure was in issue some of the most populous villages in the province, such as Long Dien and Dat Do, where farming was the major occupation. But elsewhere in the province, such as the districts of Duc Thanh and Xuyen Moc or the fishing villages of the Long Hai peninsular, farming's secondary status meant land tenure was less of a concern. Conversely, in some of these areas it was the Front's policies, rather than those of the government, that drove popular discontent. In villages that depended on the export of primary produce such as timber or rubber to external markets, the Front's destruction of roads and bridges and its increasingly heavy taxation of traffic imposed a significant economic burden. It is thus important to demonstrate that while widespread popular support for the Front existed in Phuoc Tuy, it was by no means unanimous – another contributing factor to the complexity of the pacification battlefield.

Phuoc Tuy's essential statistics and immediate history were known to the Australians on their arrival. Incorporated as the province of Baria in October 1956, it had been renamed Phuoc Tuy (which translates roughly into English as 'prosperous and peaceful') in 1962. The province achieved its final 'shape' in 1964 when the Vung Tau peninsular was excised, leaving a malformed rectangle of territory of approximately 1820 square kilometres and containing 103,887 people.[246] Located in the space between the highlands of the Annam Mountains and the flats of the Mekong Delta, Phuoc Tuy was often considered a fringe of the latter, but, importantly, it shared many geographic features with the former. Like the rest of the southern Vietnam Phuoc Tuy had a monsoonal climate, with the 'wet' lasting from June to September and the 'dry' from October to May each year. Horner's sketch of the province gives some idea of what this meant in practice:

[246] 'Phuoc Tuy Province Survey', May 1969, pp. 1-4; 300 AWM103.

> The dry season from October to May was slightly cooler but nevertheless still warm ... The paddy fields were dry, yellow and baked hard as concrete, and often a smoke haze hung in the air as farmers burnt off their fields in preparation for planting in the wet season. Once the 'wet' or monsoon season arrived ... the climate became more oppressive. High temperatures and humidity quickly sapped all energy.[247]

Largely flat (although it rose to the north), the province lacked the rich alluvial soil of the Delta. As a consequence, it had a more diversified economy in which rice, although still the primary form of agriculture, did not dominate but existed alongside industries such as fishing and woodcutting. This diversified economy lead to an uneven distribution of population. The best soil for growing rice was in the central south of the province, and consequently the majority of the population lived there in the villages of Hoa Long, Long Phuoc, Dat Do, Long Dien and the capital, Baria. These villages formed a roughly triangular area, with the base being formed by the three villages sitting on a west-east axis on Route 23 – Baria, Long Dien and Dat Do – and the tip by Hoa Long and Long Phuoc.

From this central populated region emanated the province's road network. The two most important were Routes 15 and 2, as both ran to Saigon. Route 15 ran from Vung Tau to Baria, and then along the border of the province and the Rung Sat Special Zone, a mangrove swamp, until it entered Bien Hoa province. Route 2 ran north from Baria to the town of Xuan Loc in neighbouring Long Khanh province, where it joined National Highway 1. Subsidiary roads included Route 23, which ran west-east from Baria to Long Dien, Dat Do, and then to the outlying village of Xuyen Moc; Route 52, which linked Long Phuoc and Long Tan to Hoa Long; Route 44, which ran in a horseshoe shape around the Long Hai hills from Long Dien to Dat Do; and Route 328, which branched off from Route 23 west of Xuyen Moc and ran roughly parallel with Route 2 until it ended in the abandoned village of Thua Tich in the province's north-east.

[247] Horner, *SAS: Phantoms of War,* p. 177.

Map 2 – *Has been removed due to copyright restrictions.*

This road network was a crucial part of the pacification battlefield. Much of the province's overall strategic significance lay in Routes 15 and 2 and the link they created between Vung Tau and Saigon. Keeping them open – and the villages on them under control – was a major objective of both 1ATF and the local RVNAF. The network was also critical economically and for security. Villages outside the Baria–Dat Do–Hoa Long area, such as Xuyen Moc, depended heavily on exporting both agricultural produce and raw materials such as wood to external markets. A key example was Binh Ba, where several years worth of rubber production had been warehoused due to the poor security of the roads leading to Saigon.[248] Consequently, successful and sustained Front taxation or interdiction of the roads linking these settlements to the centre could be economically crippling and, would serve the Front as both a useful source of revenue and a mechanism for punishing hostile villages. Perhaps most importantly, however, was where the road network did not go. Most of the province had no road infrastructure, little formal settlement and was therefore outside government control. These areas – to the east and west of Route 2 – constituted most of the province's land area. Generally covered in thick triple-canopy jungle and interspersed with creeks and rivers running north-south and small massifs, the jungle formed ideal 'base areas' for Front units.

To this end, Front base areas were not formally defined and instead consisted of interlocking networks of individual bunker systems and camps, through which NLF and PLAF units could disperse. As the name suggests, the fundamental purpose of base areas was to provide Communist units with areas of sanctuary where they could rest, train, re-equip and prepare for their next action. They consequently shared a number of characteristics. Base areas were usually located in remote jungle areas that were difficult to access and provided visual cover. Reliable access to water was essential. A favoured location was

[248] Transcript of interview with BRIG O.D. Jackson by LTCOL R.F. Morrison, 9 March 1972, Sydney, p. 63; 2 AWM107.

province boundaries as the Front preferred to exploit administrative divisions to complicate any potential military operations against them. The largest of the base areas in Phuoc Tuy was the Hat Dich, the valley that dominated the north-west of the province. Codenamed Base Area 303 by the Australians, it straddled the Phuoc Tuy-Bien Hoa border. Subsidiary base areas existed in the jungle east of Route 2 and north of Xuyen Moc – Base Areas 301 and 302 respectively. All were linked by a system of tracks and trails that were operated by dedicated logistical units, most prominently Rear Services Group 84.[249]

Map 3 - ***Has been removed due to copyright restrictions.***

These Front jungle base areas were complemented by other positions established in the most dominant physical features within the province: three sets of hills – the Nui May Tao, the Nui Dinhs, and the Long Hais. The Nui May Tao sat in the far north-west corner of the province, in the middle of the junction between Phuoc Tuy, Long Khanh and Binh Tuy. Isolated from population centres and the road system, the Nui May Tao and its surrounds were generally used by larger Front units, often of the 5th VC Division, for rest and refitting. It was codenamed 'Base Area 300' by the Australians, who noted both its importance and relationship to external base areas:

> It reportedly lies on a personnel corridor which stretches through War Zone D into War Zone C and thence to COSVN ... The characteristics of this base area are revealed by its installations and Special Agent Report activity. It is believed to be a major operational base, logistical complex, and also a training area. The area is probably resupplied by coastal resupply operations from the south and by supplies from War Zone D.[250]

Thanks to its distance from the populated areas of Phuoc Tuy, however, the Nui May Tao base area was, like the units it usually housed, a step removed from the daily struggle in the province. Although PLAF main force units could disrupt

[249] BRIG S.C. Graham to IIFFV, 'Measure of Progress (VC Base Area Denial) – Jan 67', 2 February 1967; 35 AWM347.
[250] BRIG Graham to IIFFV, 'Measure of Progress (VC Base Area Denial) – Jan 67', 2 February 1967; 35 AWM347.

pacification activity, this happened only a handful of times. Thus the Nui May Tao remained a fundamentally military, rather than pacification problem.

More significant to pacification activities within Phuoc Tuy were the Nui Dinh and Nui Thi Vai, generally referred to as the Nui Dinhs or 'the Warburtons' by Australian soldiers. Located in the south-east of the province, this hill system lay in a north-easterly direction that paralleled Route 15 and the Rung Sat. Reaching a maximum height of 504 metres, the 'Nui Thi Vai, Nui Toc Tien and the Dinh hills dominated the horizon when you looked west from Nui Dat', as one Australian later wrote.[251] The terrain was forbidding – 'layers of jungle at the base, tall trees that gave way to boulders the size of trucks, which eventually reared up to a razorback spur punctuated by scrubby foliage ... washed-out jagged browns and greens, pockmarked by a thousand bomb craters or splattered with napalm that clung in clumps to the rocks like dried honeycomb'[252] Codenamed Base Area 304 by 1ATF, the Nui Dinh system served as a logistical hub for the Front, receiving supplies gathered from the villages clustered along Route 15 and those entering through the mangrove swamps of the Rung Sat. Although often inhabited only by Front local force companies and village party chapters, the Nui Dinhs could contain up to a battalion; an Australian intelligence estimate from early 1967 noted 'the 265th Battalion [of 274 Regiment] … probably operated from here, as is evidenced by its disastrous destruction of an ARVN unit returning from infiltration training to the military school nearby [in early 1966]'.[253]

What made the Nui Dinhs especially important was both their location and the nature of the terrain. The height of the hill system gave clear observation out to Nui Dat, six kilometres distant, and surrounding areas such as the Hat Dich. The hill system also dominated both Route 15 and Baria. Only a narrow band of rice paddy separated Baria from the scrub and jungle of Nui Dinh proper, making infiltration comparatively easy, and it took just one day to

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[251] Peter Haran and Robert Kearney, *Crossfire,* New Holland, Sydney, 2001, p. 70.
[252] Haran and Kearney, *Crossfire,* pp. 70–71
[253] BRIG Graham to IIFFV, 'Measure of Progress (VC Base Area Denial) – Jan 67', 2 February 1967; 35 AWM347.

march from the heart of the complex into the town itself.[254] Likewise, Front mortar fire could be brought to bear all along Route 15. As one Australian officer remembered, 'from positions up on Nui Thi Vai they could correct their fire by direct observation of the bomb bursts. They could then retreat from our counter bombardment in an instant into caves or tunnels and be ready to emerge again when the next likely target appeared on the road.'[255] This highlights the other major advantage of hill systems as base areas. Cave systems and narrow re-entrants gave excellent protection against air and artillery strikes, and armoured vehicles could only manoeuvre on the fringes of the system. The task of scouring the area thus fell to the infantry, who were vulnerable in areas that were often heavily booby-trapped.

The Nui Dinhs shared these characteristics with the Long Hai Hills, known to the Front as the Minh Dam Secret Zone. Sitting in the southern coast of the province, below the population triangle and to the immediate east of Vung Tau and the end of the Rung Sat, the Long Hais ran for approximately 10 kilometres north-south and formed their own small peninsular that jutted out into the sea. The three largest hills (Nui Truong Phi, Nui Chau Nien and Hon Vung) sat at the southern edge of the peninsular, with a ridge running north down to the smaller hills of Nui Dien Ba, Nui Hon Thung and Nui Da Dung. Hon Vung was the tallest massif, at 327 metres; the hills dropped to the north, with Nui Dien Ba 200 metres tall and the twin hills of Nui Hon Thung and Nui Da Dung 214 and 173 respectively.[256]

Like the Nui Dinhs, the Long Hais thus represented key 'high ground' in the province, with views over the western half of the populated triangle, the villages of Route 44 and the jungle and scrub of the west of the province. They also represented an almost perfect physical sanctuary for the Front. Scrub extended down from the hills to the very fringe of Long Dien and the smaller villages of Long Hai, Tam Phuoc and Long My, giving guerrillas perfect cover for infiltration and exfiltration. Access to the other villages on Route 44 and Dat Do

[254] McNeill and Eikns, *Fighting to the Finish*, p. 20.
[255] O'Neill, *Vietnam Task,* p. 114.
[256] Lockhart, *The Minefield,* p. 109.

proper was only marginally more hazardous, requiring short trips across open paddy fields. Finally, a corridor of vegetation extended east from the hills that provided a clear route into the jungles of Xuyen Moc. The Minh Dam was thus, in many respects, a smaller version of the Nui May Tao base area – at the centre of a logistics hub that extended out into the rest of the province and the rest of the III CTZ.

The Minh Dam was also, however, a fortress in its own right, more so than both the Nui Dinhs and the Nui May Tao. Enormous granite boulders formed re-entrants and cave systems that were able to withstand the heaviest firepower available, including B-52 air strikes. When the Australians penetrated into the hills during Operation PINAROO in 1968, they found:

> some forty, literally bombproof rock caves ... some multi-level, comprising many rooms and including running water, the largest extending in an complex 228 metres long with interconnecting tunnels between working and living areas.[257]

There is also evidence to suggest that these discoveries were merely the tip of the proverbial iceberg. Unsurprisingly, the area had a long revolutionary history, having been the centre of resistance against the French after 1945. As one Australian assessment stated, it represented both the geographic and political 'centre of the VC district of Long Dat'.[258] In general terms, Phuoc Tuy could thus be thought of as 'an ideal environment for guerrilla operations'.[259] The geography provided perfect base areas from which local units could access the villages and evade RVNAF sweeps. Simultaneously, these base areas were also integrated into the Front's regional and national logistics networks, particularly through Xuyen Moc's isolated and open coastline and the mangrove swamps of the Rung Sat.

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[257] Kemp, 'An Engineer Operation', pp. 4-5, unpublished draft paper, D/3/9 AWM257, quoted in McNeill and Ekins, *On the Offensive*, p. 338.
[258] Annex A, 'Enemy Forces', in '1ATF Op INSTR 5/67 Operation RENMARK', 15 February 67; 1/4/30 AWM95.
[259] Horner, *SAS: Phantoms of War,* p. 176.

Chapter 1 illustrated how the insurgency grew as a political phenomenon in both Phuoc Tuy and the South as a whole, and how the period 1959–1965 saw the growth of an alternative government in the south; 'an interregnum while two political movements laid claim to the state', as Murphy put it.[260] Yet it needs to be emphasised how far this process had moved by 1966; the contest was no longer just political but spatial in Phuoc Tuy. By this stage both the RVN and the Front had their own capitals, armed forces, and political infrastructure. Both sides executed the functions of government, such as taxation and recruitment, and both sides controlled certain segments of territory outright. Thus Phuoc Tuy was, in 1966, a province very much divided.

RVN administration of Phuoc Tuy was based on the existing Vietnamese model of province-district-village-hamlet. Phuoc Tuy was divided into five districts, each run by an ARVN officer (either a Major or Captain) out of a district compound. Xuyen Moc, the largest in area but smallest in population, covered the eastern third of the province, with its district headquarters located in the village from which it took its name. Duc Thanh, like Xuyen Moc, was large in area but small in population, covered the northern half of the province west of the Song Rai River, and contained most of Phuoc Tuy's rubber industry. The remaining three districts – Long Le, Long Dien and Dat Do – covered the south-west corner of the province and held most of the population. Dat Do bordered Xuyen Moc to the east, Duc Thanh to the north, and Long Dien to the west. It contained Dat Do village, where the district compound was located, and the villages on the eastern part of Route 44, most notably Lang Phuoc Hai. Its western border with Long Dien ran along the Long Hai ridgeline. Long Dien consisted of the two northern massifs in the Long Hais, the eastern corner of the Rung Sat and the saltpans it contained, the villages on the western part of Route 44, and Long Dien itself. Finally, there was Long Le. Although containing Baria, the Long Le district compound was in Hoa Long. This district also included Route 15, the Nui Dinhs, Long Son Island and the Van Kiep training centre.

[260] Murphy, *Harvest of Fear*, p. 181.

Presiding over the RVN governance structure in Phouc Tuy in 1966 was the Province Chief, Lieutenant Colonel Le Duc Dat. A native of northern Vietnam, he had begun his military career with the French as a cavalryman before transferring his allegiances to the RVN, and he was the only Province Chief to have survived the post-Diem purges.[261] Australian officers were consistent in their praise of Dat – 'we were able to rely on what he did and what he said', Brigadier Jackson recalled, 'and we knew darn well that he was a straight shooter, and a good soldier, and a good Province Chief too'.[262] Dat's American advisers were not so positive. Jeffrey Race, author of *War Comes to Long An,* served as an adviser in Xuyen Moc district in 1966–67. In a 2010 interview he described Dat as 'a very oily character…basically, being the province chief was a business for him'.[263] John Paul Vann, the mercurial and flawed American pacification expert who from 1967 until 1968 was the head of CORDS in III CTZ, was instrumental in having Dat relieved for corruption in September 1967. Dat was aligned with Ky, and failed to read the political winds; with Thieu in the ascendant, Vann was able to overcome Dat's political connections and have him removed for 'excessive graft'.[264]

Dat represented the other side of the revolutionary tradition. A statement made in 1966 to Robert O'Neill, at the time 5RAR's intelligence officer, gives some idea of the deep roots of the conflict and the attitude of Dat towards his opponent. Asked why he had given a heavy sentence to some local NLF guerrillas, Dat replied: 'For sixteen years I have been fighting these people – for sixteen years they have ruined my life and killed my friends. I will be lenient to the Viet Cong regular who is fighting because he is forced to, but to saboteurs and spies who are all volunteers I will not be lenient!'[265] Dat had spent his entire adult life at war; and a deep personal bitterness, typical of civil wars, had grown within him. Yet Dat's statement also reveals his fundamental attitude to the insurgency. His differentiation of the conscripted 'Viet Cong

[261] O'Neill, *Vietnam Task,* p. 13; McNeill and Ekins, *On the Offensive,* p. 39.
[262] Interview with BRIG O.D. Jackson, 9 March 1972, p. 83; 2 AWM107.
[263] Michael Montesano, 'War Comes to Long An, its Origins and Legacies: An Interview with Jeffrey Race', *Journal of Vietnamese Studies,* Vol. 6, No. 1, p. 135.
[264] Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie,* p. 765.
[265] O'Neill, *Vietnam Task*, p. 13.

regular' and the 'saboteurs and spies' of the local guerrilla force hinted at a man 'inclined to pay only lip service to the notion that behind the communist military insurrection lay a social revolution' – an attitude widely held within the ARVN, and thus the government.[266]

Below Dat were his deputies, bureau chiefs and district chiefs. These men were responsible for the administration of government within the province, and their personal failings go some way to explaining the precarious position the RVN found itself in within Phuoc Tuy by 1966. Dat's Deputy for Security, Major Le Cong Dung, was extremely corrupt even in the context of his time and place. He would go on to sell rice directly to the NLF in 1967, with his wife also demanding substantial kickbacks from the Front in the process. Do Tranh Tron, the head of the Province's MSWR (Ministry for Social Welfare and Refugees) branch, was also not only extraordinarily corrupt but also vindictive, with competent subordinates routinely fired. Tron also demonstrated the importance of political patronage and the enormous obstacle it presented to improving government performance. Despite having been caught stealing while MSWR chief in both Binh Duong province and Tay Ninh, Tron kept his job thanks to an impressive bribes list that included the Assistant Social Welfare Minister, the Social Welfare Inspector Chief, and the III CTZ Social Welfare Inspector. Likewise, the Police Chief Nguyen Van Xuan kept his job because, as one American report noted, he 'appears to have close political ties with one element of Nguyen Cao Ky's supporters', despite the fact he 'frequently absents himself to Saigon' and was of 'questionable honesty'.[267] This is not to say all of Phuoc Tuy's civil servants were corrupt or incompetent. The agriculture chief, Pham Van Tong, was regarded as an 'able, competent administrator with an adequate knowledge of crop production VN style' and had been in the job since March 1955.[268] Individual district and village chiefs were often honest and

[266] McNeill and Ekins, *On the Offensive*, p. 41.
[267] COL R.M. Montague to Hank Cushing, 'Subject: Phuoc Tuy', 31 March 1969; 201/1/15 PART 2 A4531, NAA. NAA.
[268] COL R.M. Montague to Hank Cushing, 'Subject: Phuoc Tuy', 31 March 1969; 201/1/15 PART 2 A4531, NAA. NAA.

competent; but these qualities often placed them in danger, and turnover rates were high.

On paper, the military force controlled by this government apparatus within Phuoc Tuy was highly impressive. Dat had at his disposal 17 Regional Force companies and 46 Popular Force platoons, with a combined strength of approximately 4500 men. Up until mid-1966 this force had been backed by an ARVN Ranger battalion, but by the time the Australians arrived these elite light infantry had been replaced by the 1/43d ARVN infantry battalion with a strength of around 350.[269] Operating behind this military force were a variety of police and paramilitary units dedicated to hunting the Front party apparatus at village level. The National Police had 590 men in Phuoc Tuy, including 80 Special Branch and 107 soldiers of 406 Company, National Police Field Force.[270] In addition there were five 59-man Revolutionary Development groups and the platoon-sized, CIA-sponsored Provincial Reconnaissance Unit.[271]

The Regional and Popular Forces (RF/PF), known as Territorials or 'Ruff Puffs' by the Australians, formed the backbone of the RVN presence in Phuoc Tuy. The Regional Forces (RF) were organised into companies consisting of three rifle and one heavy weapon platoons, and were under the direct command of the province chief. The role of the RF was to guard the province's lines of communication, populated areas and buildings of particular importance such as government compounds. As a province-level asset, they could be concentrated or dispersed depending on the province chief's assessment of the security situation. In contrast, the Popular Forces were supposed to consist of individual platoons raised within villages or hamlets for the defence of that settlement, and they came under the control of the local district chief. Each Popular Force platoon was expected to prevent Front incursions into its hamlet

[269] McNeill and Ekins, *On the Offensive*, pp. 41–43. It should be noted that, unlike the Territorials or associated paramilitary units, the ARVN presence in Phuoc Tuy became sporadic after the arrival of 1ATF.
[270] 'Status of Police Personnel, Phuoc Tuy, 2 February 1967', Miscellaneous Reports '67, A1 525 Public Safety Directorate Field Operations Division General Records 1965–73, RG472, NARA.
[271] HQ 1ATF to HQ AFV, 'Civil Affairs: Revolutionary Development Teams in Phuoc Tuy Province', 8 December 1967; R176/1/36 AWM 98.

or village, help identify and neutralise the Front infrastructure within the hamlet or village, and provide security for government buildings and officials.[272] In practice, however, there was little difference in 1966 between the war fought by the Regional and Popular Forces.[273]

The RF/PF were emerging from a period of flux when the Australians arrived in Phuoc Tuy in mid-1966. Prior to 1964, the Territorial Forces had consisted of the paramilitary Civil Guard and a part-time militia known as the Self-Defence Corps. As the insurgency intensified over the course of the early 1960s, these units fought an increasingly open war against local Front units. In recognition of this, in 1964 the Civil Guard and the Self-Defence Corps were absorbed into the RVNAF and renamed the Territorial and Popular Forces, respectively.[274] Pay levels were increased over the course of 1965-66 to attract recruits and retain recruits, and the organisation and equipment of companies and platoons was standardised. As one South Vietnamese general put it, 'gradually, in their outlook, deportment, and combat performance, the RF and PF troopers shed their para-military origins and increasingly became full-fledged soldiers.'[275]

Nonetheless, significant problems remained. Because of their particular role (known as 'territorial security') the RF/PF 'bore the brunt of the insurgent war, suffering more casualties than the ARVN, while also at times accounting for more Viet Cong casualties than the regular ARVN forces.'[276] Despite this, in 1966 they continued to be a secondary priority for US material and advisory support. The RF/PF often lacked modern small arms and existed at the end of tenuous logistics system. Moreover, the rapid expansion of the force from 1964 onwards left units in Phuoc Tuy critically short of officers, NCOs, and adequate training. In December 1965 the senior American adviser in Phuoc Tuy noted that the province's Regional Force companies had only sixty percent of their

[272] Ngo Quang Truong, *Territorial Forces,* US Army Centre of Military History, Washington D.C., 1978, p. 75.
[273] Truong, *Territorial Forces,* p. 26.
[274] Truong, *Territorial Forces,* pp. 25-26; see also Miller, *Misalliance,* pp. 192-194.
[275] Truong, *Territorial Forces,* p. 34.
[276] Ekins and McNeill, *On the Offensive,* p. 41.

authorised NCOs and fifty five percent of their authorised officers, and that forty percent of the Popular Force platoons lacked commanders.[277]

Consequently, the RVN's position in Phuoc Tuy was almost entirely static. Out of a mixture of both administrative and functional necessity, Dat's forces were not concentrated in large forces for mobile operations but spread wafer thin across the province in an effort to secure ground and people. In an instructive case study, three Regional Force companies and ten Popular Force platoons were assigned to the villages along Route 15 – the most strategically important piece of infrastructure in the province. This force was scattered across no less than eight separate compounds; mutual support was out of the question. It was much the same across the rest of the province. Each of the five district compounds had a Regional Forces company and a battery of artillery; beyond that, units were on their own. Most were concentrated on the Baria–Dat Do axis, with subsidiary concentrations in Long Hai village, Lang Phuoc Hai, Xuyen Moc, Binh Gia and Hoa Long. The end result was dire. The Australian Official History records that, by the start of 1966, outside Binh Gia and Baria, 'in daylight the Government had partial control of the village of Long Dien, the western fringe of Dat Do, and the villages of Long Hao, Xuyen Moc and Phu My'.[278]

As will be seen, there was considerable argument that the use of large units (battalion and above) to hunt the 'elusive guerrillas' of the Front was counterproductive, and that 1ATF achieved its best results when operating in company or platoon groups.[279] While this was true, this argument was based on a number of assumptions. These units had to be able to manoeuvre independently, have effective external fire support in the form of artillery and air strikes, and operate in an environment where the threat of PLAF main force units had been removed. At the start of 1966, none of these conditions held true for the RVN in Phuoc Tuy. The RF/PF lacked both the means and the training to

[277] James C. Finsterie, 'Senior Adviser Monthly Evaluation, December 1965, Phuoc Tuy', 29 December 1965, p. 4; SAME Reports, Dec. 1965, Vol. 2, Box 13, A1 123, RG 0472, NARA.
[278] McNeill, *To Long Tan*, p. 224.
[279] See Ch 8, 'Déjà vu All Over Again'.

operate independently in this manner, and faced PLAF units – the 5th Division and D445 battalion – that had repeatedly defeated ARVN units in battle over the preceding years. The 5th Division and D445 formed the most threatening part of the Front's presence in Phuoc Tuy. The 5th had been formed in November 1965, with its primary combat components being the 274 and 275 Regiments. The mission of the 5th upon activation was 'to base itself in Ba Ria-Long Khanh for a long-term battle and to support the revolutionary movements at the local level'.[280] What this meant in practice was that while this formation remained a constant presence in its traditional base areas (the Hat Dich and Nui May Taos) in the north of the province, its focus was on the approaches to Saigon that lay to the north-west of Phuoc Tuy. After the battle of Long Tan and a number of subsidiary engagements in 1967, the division would operate only on the fringes of Phuoc Tuy until the Nguyen Hue offensive of 1972. Nonetheless, and as will be seen in the next chapter, these battles in 1966–67 demonstrated the threat posed to Free World Military Assistance Forces (FWMAF) units operating independently in Phuoc Tuy by these large PLAF formations.

Aside from the 5th Division and D445 were Front military units directly under the control of Ba Long province, the Front's shadow province that most closely corresponded with Phuoc Tuy. Ba Long's history is not easy to sketch out – as the province boundaries were frequently modified, or the province itself renamed – but generally it corresponded to Phuoc Tuy (or Ba Ria, as the Front labelled it) and Long Khanh (as the name suggests). However, if the provincial boundaries often shifted, the district ones did not, and Phuoc Tuy was covered (approximately) by the shadow Front districts of Chau Duc, Long Dat and Xuyen Moc. Xuyen Moc matched its RVN counterpart, while Chau Duc encompassed Duc Thanh and parts of Long Le. Long Dat, again as the name suggests, was the Long Dien–Dat Do area.

By 1966 these three Front shadow districts each had a sophisticated Party apparatus that was more comprehensive, and certainly more secure, than

[280] Colonel Ho Son Dai, ed., *Lich Su Su Doan Bo Binh 5 (1965-2005),* quoted in Warren Wilkins, *Grab Their Belts To Fight Them*, Naval Institute Press, Annapolis, 2011, p. 103.

the RVN equivalent. The aim of this Front infrastructure was, as R. Michael Pearce has argued, 'to establish in the villages an insurgent environment wherein all activities of the peasants were directed by the revolutionary organization'.[281] This was accomplished through an array of committees and Front organisations that co-opted the population and undertook functions such as propaganda and taxation. Other 'Front' organisations – that is to say, nominally non-Party, such as Women's and Farmer's Associations – were also used to draw villagers into the movement.[282]

This arrangement was protected at every level by armed units. By 1966 most of the villages in the province possessed a Front guerrilla unit. Ranging in size from squads of ten or so to platoons of thirty-plus, these village units consisted of part-time soldiers who were armed with low grade weapons such as bolt action rifles, submachine guns, carbines and grenades, in some cases captured from RF/PF units. Their job was to protect 'illegal' members of the infrastructure (that is, those with no legal standing in the RVN). They generally lived outside villages, in base areas, acted as guides for members of larger units such as D445, and carried out assassinations where necessary. Australian intelligence estimated that 400 or so guerrillas were active within the province by mid-1966.[283]Above these guerrillas were the Front's district units. These units acted in a similar role to the village guerrillas (and in the case of Xuyen Moc were virtually identical). They provided security for infrastructure, acting as an intermediate link or supplement to higher formations, and undertaking independent action where necessary. The most powerful of these units was the Long Dat's C25 Company, which numbered approximately 50. The two units in Chau Duc, C20 and C21, had a combined total of 70 (these were later concentrated into one unit, C41). C23, of approximately platoon size (30), operated in Xuyen Moc.[284]

[281] Pearce, *The Insurgent Environment*, p. x.
[282] Frost, *Australia's War in Vietnam,* pp. 47–48.
[283] 'Intelligence Estimate No. 1', 21 May 1966; 7/5/2 AWM95.
[284] McNeill and Ekins, *On the Offensive*, p. 49.

The most powerful unit available regularly to the Front in Phuoc Tuy was, however, D445 battalion. Formally established in May 1965, the battalion had an initial strength of 350 men, organised into three line companies and a fourth support company.[285] Its weaponry included rifles, heavy machine guns and mortars.[286] Although the name given to the battalion by the Australians, 'Phuoc Tuy's Own', was an obvious joke, it also contained a kernel of truth in that D445 had long since outgrown its Binh Xuyen roots, and by 1966 most of its members had been recruited directly from Phuoc Tuy, particularly the areas of the Long Dat.[287] By 1966 D445 was larger and at least as well armed as its ARVN counterpart in Phuoc Tuy, the 1/43d, and it had consistently displayed superior discipline, aggression, morale, tactical ability, and combat effectiveness than its South Vietnamese opponents. In addition, another battalion, D440, and subsidiary sapper and artillery units supported it. D440 was to have a chequered history, and would eventually be folded into D445. D445's associated sapper and artillery units were both considered elite units, however, although their battlefield use did not necessarily support this.[288]

Thus, by the time US and Australian forces arrived in Phuoc Tuy in May 1966, the Front had established a clear military advantage over the RVN in the province. The numerical superiority of the RVNAF in Phuoc Tuy was negated by their dispersal of units into isolated, static positions. Poor training and motivation meant that many of these RF/PF companies and platoons were largely content to remain within their compounds, allowing Front cadres and guerrillas unfettered access to villages and hamlets. This access allowed supplies, recruits and intelligence to be gathered for the larger Front units, such as D445, that were located in more remote base areas. Crucially, however, it also created the conditions for the Front to increase their political advantage within these villages and hamlets. The Front was able to simultaneously limit the influence of the government through the assassination and intimidation of

[285] Chamberlain, *The Viet Cong D445 Battalion*, p. 24.
[286] See Tab A to Appendix 1 to 'INTSUM 1/66'; 1/4/1 AWM95.
[287] McNeill and Ekins, *On the Offensive*, p. 48.
[288] Transcript of interview with BRIG Jackson by LTCOL R.F. Morrison, 9 March 1972, Sydney, p. 57; 2 AWM107.

local officials while also maximising its ability to spread its message to the populace. With the average villager in Phuoc Tuy having only limited access to government print media and radio, the ability of cadre to hold propaganda meetings and distribute their own political material was critical – emphasising that for pacification to succeed in its objectives, Front access to villages had to be stopped.

This military advantage was also distinct enough that the 'shadow government' of the Front, had in some places, becomes overt. This was illustrated in Long Le district, home of both the province capital Baria and the 'liberated village' Long Phuoc. Baria was not only the physical heart of the province but also the political one – it remained, through the course of the war, the bastion of pro-RVN and anti-NLF feeling within Phuoc Tuy. But just seven kilometres away along Route 52 was Long Phuoc, which had been under almost continuous Party control since the late 1940s and encapsulated the dynamics driving the insurgency in Phuoc Tuy. The two capitals glowered at each over a stretch of dirt road, paddy fields, and the village of Hoa Long, itself physically cut in half by the two sides. This situation as it existed in May 1966 gives some idea of the complexity of the pacification battlefield; and the situation as it would evolve shows the profound impact the arrival of 1ATF had on those complexities.

Although the first Party chapter in Phuoc Tuy had been formed in Lang Phuoc Hai, Long Phuoc and the neighbouring village of Long Tan were clearly the Party's primary stronghold in the province. Long Phuoc had been controlled by the Viet Minh since 1948, with the Party chapter possessing nearly 50 members, and with the French presence limited to large-scale armed incursions.[289] As noted earlier, the Anti-Communist Denunciation Campaign was particularly effective in Long Phuoc, with Party membership falling from 50 to 3 by 1960.[290] With the resumption of armed struggle from 1959, however, it

[289] 'Record of Conversation with Village Chief at Tam Phuoc YS4558 2100 hrs to 2400 hrs 21 Nov 69', 21 November 1969, pp. 1-2; 201/1/15 PART 2 A4531, NAA..
[290] Murphy, *Harvest of Fear*, pp. 86–87.

rapidly returned to its previous status and by 1963 Long Phuoc and Long Tan represented the only two 'liberated villages' in the province.[291]

The phrase 'liberated village' suggested a dour place, and some Australians seemed surprised at the level of prosperity in Long Phuoc. Australian journalist Pat Burgess, writing in the *Bulletin,* described:

> ...a village of deep, cool wells, of fishponds shaded by flowering shrubs, of verandahs made for children to play around and to shade the old from the Phuoc Tuy sun. In almost every yard there were wood shavings. It was a village of craftsmen, who made their own furniture, who carved their own candlesticks. It was a village of subsistence farmers and fishermen. It was also, it turned out, a village of riflemen.[292]

The surprise of Australians, soldier and civilian alike, at the brick houses and artisan furniture of Long Phuoc almost certainly reflected their own naivety as much as the village's prosperity. As Jeffrey Race noted:

> life in the Mekong Delta is much easier than in central or northern Vietnam ... To supplement his rice diet, the peasant need only drop a line into the stream or canal going by his house to have fish for dinner, and he can plant vegetables in the front yard or buy them cheaply from one of his neighbours who grows extra. Even in a bad season there will still be enough rice for local consumption, and there is always plenty of fish.[293]

The margins of surplus were not as large in Phuoc Tuy as they were in the central Mekong, but the model remained the same. The villagers of Long Phuoc were, as Burgess noted, primarily subsistence farmers who grew rice in the surrounding paddy fields. Income and diet were supplemented by locally grown fruit and fish caught in nearby irrigation channels, creeks, and the Suoi Da Bang. Although they were free from rent and government taxation, it is likely that the Front absorbed the village's surplus production, particularly after 1964.

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[291] Chamberlain, *The Viet Cong D445 Battalion*, p. 12.
[292] Pat Burgess, 'Village of Hidden Hate', *Bulletin,* August 21, 1976, p. 17.
[293] Race, *War comes to Long An,* p. 6

As Burgess' ironic note about riflemen suggests, however, Long Phuoc was not all idle peacefulness. In 1948, the village Party chapter had started construction of a tunnel system that soon measured some 300 metres. This system was rapidly revived after 1960:

> In the times of opposing the Americans, the provincial troops (C445) helped develop the tunnels in Bac Long Phuoc hamlet to a length of more than 800 metres and a depth below ground level of five metres. The tunnels were two metres in height and a metre wide. On the surface, on both sides of the tunnels there were communication trenches, fighting position, spike traps and minefields.[294]

The tunnel system demonstrated the mobilisation of the village in support of the Party; most houses had bunkers for protection, with entrances usually concealed by furniture, and with at least half connected to the tunnel system. There was also a communications tunnel that stretched nearly two kilometres out of the village, providing both a concealed link to external areas, and a potential escape route for the province Party committee.[295] This tunnel system proved its worth when C445 defeated an RVN sweep into the village in March 1963. From that point Long Phuoc remained unmolested, and continued to serve as both a shadow province capital and a key source of recruits and supplies for D445.[296]

The tunnel system serves as an obvious metaphor for the Party's presence in Long Phuoc; hidden from sight, it outlasted both the French and RVN presence in the village. It also gives some indication of the forces driving support for the insurgency in Phuoc Tuy. Long Phuoc's economic situation almost certainly formed the basis for support for the Party, particularly in the war against the French. But the depth of revolutionary tradition would have been providing the momentum for the Party by 1966, with the village having been under their control for the better part of twenty years. The Australians of

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[294] Chamberlain, *The Viet Cong D445 Battalion*, p. 13.
[295] For maps of Long Phuoc's tunnel system see Annex D 'Minor Tunnel Systems' and Annex E 'Long Phuoc Tunnel Complex Location Plan', in BRIG O.D. Jackson, 'Combat After Action Report: Operation ENOGGERA', 7 August 1966; 1/4/8 AWM95.
[296] Chamberlain, *The Viet Cong D445 Battalion*, p. 13.

1ATF would, however, soon give the inhabitants of Long Phuoc an even more concrete reason to support the Party over the RVN.

With Long Phuoc having been secured by the Front by March 1963, and with the military balance swinging in their favour, the pacification battlefield shifted to Hoa Long. Burgess described Hoa Long 'as ugly, as mean a village as you would find anywhere in the so-called republic'.[297] The contrast with Long Phuoc is obvious, although missing from Burgess' description is the acknowledgement that Hoa Long's frequent role as a battlefield over the previous decade had undoubtedly contributed to that ugliness. After the fall of Diem in November 1963, Ap Tay, the hamlet considered most pro-government, was burned down by the Front, a clear demonstration of the Front's willingness to resort to violent intimidation. Ap Tay remained empty until the residents of Long Phuoc were relocated there in 1966.[298] By mid-1966 Hoa Long had become 'a type of no-man's land'. The northern two hamlets were controlled by the Front, who used them as a base to launch sorties against the two southern, government-controlled, hamlets.[299]

Hoa Long's story is instructive on how distance, time and mechanisms of control all shaped the pacification battlefield. The village shared many features with Long Phuoc, not least in the way the economy was rice-driven; and it too had a strong Party tradition. Yet its proximity to Baria meant Hoa Long always had to contend with more government interference than its neighbour, a problem compounded by the arrival of 1ATF at Nui Dat. A prime example of this was the conversion of the village into a strategic hamlet. Equally, however, the dismantling of the hamlet defences of Ap Dong and Ap Bac in early 1963 suggested that the Party had considerable support within the village.[300] Despite this, the government was never fully evicted from Hoa Long. Bunkered down in the village compound, 787 RF Company had managed to survive to this point.

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[297] Burgess, 'Village of Hidden Hate', p. 18.
[298] 2LT M.L. Morrison, 'Hoa Long Ground Team Report 13-17 April 1971', p. 1 in *Province Survey*; 56 AWM304.
[299] Robert O'Neill, 'Three Villages of Phuoc Tuy', *Quadrant*, vol. XI, no. 1, Jan–Feb 1967, p. 5.
[300] Chamberlain, *The Viet Cong D445 Battalion*, Annex N, p. 1

Writing in early 1967, 5RAR intelligence officer Robert O'Neill argued that Hoa Long was far from a lost cause; 'the people of Hoa Long fell between two limits, giving neither ardent support to the Viet Cong nor complete apathy towards both the Viet Cong and the government'.[301] This was an overly optimistic view; a contemporaneous Task Force document was more accurate. It noted '3,756 persons live in HOA LONG. Many of these people are known to be VC cadre members, communists, guerillas, or relatives of main force VC. Many are openly hostile to the Government.'[302] Over the next two years it would become clear that the Task Force had greatly underestimated the depth of support present for the Front in Hoa Long.

Throughout the rest of the province a dynamic existed that was recognisable for much of the war – an overt government visibility that hid a covert Front presence. This was a dynamic in which the government ruled by day, and the Front by night. The two sides were not separated horizontally but rather vertically, layers of allegiance occupying the same village or hamlet. The only place in the province where this did not exist was along the seven-kilometre stretch of road between Baria and Long Phuoc, where the Front had the strength and depth of support to overtly challenge the government. This state of affairs, which persisted for three years, came to an end in May 1966 with the arrival of 1ATF and its 'escort', the US Army's 173d Airborne Brigade. Yet the pre-existing situation demonstrated the enormous mismatch in combat power between the Front and the RVN's allies, and the crucial role played by that combat power in shaping the pacification battlefield. Within three months of the arrival of 1ATF, Long Phuoc and Long Tan had been evacuated and destroyed, Hoa Long was undergoing pacification and the military rejoinder to the Task Force's arrival had been defeated in the rubber plantations of Xa Long Tan.

Immediately to the north of Nui Dat was the district of Duc Thanh. After Xuyen Moc, it was the largest district in the province, and after Xuyen Moc it

[301] O'Neill, 'Three Villages', p. 6.
[302] Annex A to Op Ord 21/66, 'Op BUNDABERG', 28 October 1966; 7/5/9 AWM95.

had the smallest population – 13,088 according to the official census, although this figure was not necessarily accurate.[303] The vast majority of the people lived in a series of settlements – Binh Ba, Binh Gia and Ngia Giao – clustered alongside Route 2, the narrow strip of road linking Phuoc Tuy's central population with neighbouring Long Khanh. One Australian officer gave this description of Duc Thanh as it looked in 1966:

> On either side of Route 2 stretches a broad plain of rich alluvial soil, thickly carpeted with plantations of bananas, rubber, coffee and pepper. Every few miles the road passes through villages of small houses with walls of sun-bleached teak and roofs of red tiles...Gardens, dogs and waving children abound. Women are seen washing clothes or babies in front of their houses, or jogging along the road in time with the resonant bobbing of the two baskets balanced across their shoulders on a sprung pole.[304]

This description of an almost serene countryside belied a harsh reality as Duc Thanh was under almost complete Communist control, with the RVN presence in a state of virtual siege. As late as November 1968, 1ATF acknowledged that, cosmetic improvements in security notwithstanding, the populations along Route 2 were 'not under effective GVN [Government of Vietnam] administrative control either from PHUOC TUY or LONG KHANH Province'.[305] Most of the district's land area consisted of the Hat Dich to the west of Route 2 and subsidiary base areas to the south of Binh Gia. The area bisected by Route 2 was a logistical corridor between the Hat Dich and Nui May Tao base areas and thus an area the Front remained keen to dominate.

Yet Duc Thanh was hardly an unqualified stronghold of active support for the Front, and it demonstrated the complexity of the pacification battlefield in Phuoc Tuy. Its primary industry was rubber, with the district responsible for most of the province's production. This rubber was contained primarily but not exclusively in the Gallia plantations of the *Societe Indochinoise de Plantation d'Heveas* (SIPH), a French corporation that had come to an uneasy arrangement

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[303] 'Civil Affairs Survey, Phuoc Tuy Province', 23 July 1967; CA/1/3 AWM314.
[304] O'Neill, 'Three Villages', p. 4.
[305] LTCOL K.W. Latchford, 'Combat After Action Report: Civil Affairs', 26 November 1968, p. 1; 17/1/19 AWM95.

with the Front.[306] Gallia provided the primary employment for the village of Binh Ba, the nearest to Nui Dat, and the company's primitive social security net ensured the workers lived in considerable comfort compared to their compatriots. O'Neill noted:

> The plantation workers' houses had been built by the French in a style far better than any native built village house. Each was constructed of brick with cream plastered walls and roof of red tile...The houses were built in pairs, each dwelling the size of a small Australian suburban house, set in an enclosure of garden which was used both for vegetable growing and for ornamental shrubbery. The whole village was laid out on a strict rectangular pattern of intersecting streets, all of which were lined with green hedges of thick-leaved shrubs.[307]

Binh Ba was thus a living colonial legacy, right down to big-game hunting French plantation manager Pernes, and his veteran engineer Mora. It also had the more serious aspects of the French colonial economy, in a high percentage of both migrant labour and Catholics, including Northern refugee priest, Father Joseph. It is perhaps surprising then that, despite this surviving colonial framework, 1ATF considered the population of Binh Ba firmly pro-Viet Cong in 1966, with an estimated 20 percent of the roughly 2300 inhabitants 'actively supporting' or 'sympathetic' to the NLF. A superficial reading might suggest this was the result of the resentment towards the French. Yet there is little evidence to support this. Working in the plantation conferred obvious material benefits and offered an opportunity for social advancement through SIPH.[308] The basis of Binh Ba's relationship with the Front rested on other factors.

On the one hand, many Australian accounts emphasised the role that a lack of security and subsequent intimidation, violence and fear played in Communist control of Binh Ba – an interpretation supported in part by the

[306] For a survey of rubber plantations in the area see LTCOL K.W. Latchford, 'Combat After Action Report: Civil Affairs', 26 November 1968, pp. 3-4; 17/1/19 AWM95.
[307] Robert O'Neill, *Vietnam Task*, p. 66. It should be noted that throughout his descriptions of the village O'Neill does not differentiate between Binh Ba the village and Binh Ba the hamlet; only the latter fits the description above, with the satellite hamlets of Duc Trung and Duc My possessing a far more organic, 'Vietnamese' layout.
[308] O'Neill, *Vietnam Task*, pp. 79–80

experience of the village for the rest of the war.[309] Like its neighbouring communities in Duc Thanh, Binh Ba's proximity to base areas and its relative isolation from the centre of the province made it an easy target for continued infiltration, and the village was never able to fully rid itself of its Communist political shadow infrastructure. This lack of security manifested itself in the spreading of propaganda, continued taxation, and the repeated kidnapping or assassination of hamlet and village leaders. In addition, the village was extremely vulnerable to occupation by PLAF main force units, and this happened repeatedly between 1966 and 1972. But Binh Ba's isolation meant, despite its colonial economic heritage, that it had rarely experienced government control since the beginning of the Resistance War, and like the rest of the province it had a long association with the Party. Like much of the rest of the province, Binh Ba's relationship to the Republic was tenuous at best. Consequently, the explanation offered by O'Neill that Binh Ba was Communist-dominated purely because of its poor security situation was unconvincing. As with much of the rest of Phuoc Tuy, the revolutionary tradition, at least in part, prevailed.

Duc Thanh also contained the province's largest Catholic community – the village of Binh Gia, located just off Route 2. This village was founded in November 1955 by 7,000 refugees from Nghe An in northern Vietnam led by their priest, Nguyen Viet Khait. In moves that anticipated the policy towards 'artificial' hamlets created after 1966, the 250 refugee families were each presented with 2000 square metres of land, building materials, 3,000 piastres, and six months' worth of rice. They were then left to construct their new lives.[310] Binh Gia was a conundrum to 1ATF, and would remain so right up until its withdrawal in 1971. As with the other villages of Duc Thanh, it was extremely isolated and consequently vulnerable to large-scale Communist military action – as graphically demonstrated during the Battle of Binh Gia in December 1964–January 1965. However, the village itself was the most secure

[309] Robert O'Neill emphasises this in both 'Three Villages of Phuoc Tuy' and *Vietnam Task* and this view is reflected in McNeill, *To Long Tan,* pp. 292–293.
[310] 2LT M.L. Morrison, 'Binh Gia Ground Team Report 25 April – 1 May', p. 1; in *Province Survey*; 56 AWM304.

in the province, with no serious Front infrastructure or infiltration. As one Australian officer would later observe, this security was brought about 'due to the inbuilt social structure of the community as opposed to its physical military type defences – which are pitiable to say the least ... Binh Gia will remain an area which frustrates the Communist ideology'.[311] The village stood as powerful testament to the way in which a security could be achieved through the willingness of the population to reject outside political movements – and conversely, the way in which the Front was sustained by popular support in the rest of the province.

Duc Thanh also demonstrated the existence of a 'shadow population' in the province that, because it was not controlled by the government, was not officially acknowledged. Between the district compound in Ngai Giao and the Courtenay rubber plantation on the Long Khanh side of the border lay an area known as 'Slope 30'. 'It is regarded by the VC as their territory,' one Australian report stated, and 'it is shown as such on their maps and fd [sic] sketches.'[312] Located on the fringes of the Hat Dich base area, Slope 30 served as a key logistical hub for the Front. Over a thousand people lived in the area, many in the hamlet of Ap Hean.[313] Despite its relative size, Ap Hean did not appear in the official RVN census. At least in this instance, the government's apparent control of the population was distorted by its willingness to ignore areas outside of that control.

The distribution of allegiance and control in Xuyen Moc district further reinforced that there were two competing governments in Phuoc Tuy by 1966, and that the allegiance of communities and individuals to them was based on a complex set of factors. The district was Phuoc Tuy's largest, covering the eastern third of the province, but also its least populated, containing

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311 CAPT P.R. Hudson, 'After Action Report', Annex D to 'Binh Gia Ground Team Report'; *Province Survey*; 56 AWM304.
312 'En Forces – Op AINSLIE', Annex A to LTCOL N.R. Charlesworth, 'OpO 10, Operation AINSLIE', 3 September 1967; 7/2/44 AWM95.
313 See Annex P to OpO 32/67, 'Ap Hean (Enlargment) [Map]', 30 August 1967 and Annex Q to OpO 32/67, 'Ap Hean Village [Map]', 30 August 1967, both in 1/4/56 AWM95.

approximately 4000 residents in 1966.[314] It was linked to the rest of the province by Route 23, which ran from Dat Do to Xuyen Moc village approximately 20 kilometres west. A smaller road, Route 328, branched off from Route 23 roughly five kilometres to the west of Xuyen Moc and ran north, roughly parallel with the Song Rai river and Route 15. Along this road lay a number of smaller settlements, such as Phuoc Buu and Thua Tich.

The arrival of large Front units in this district in 1965 significantly altered this situation. The GVN presence retreated to Xuyen Moc village, forcibly relocating the population of hamlets like Phuoc Buu where possible.[315] Consequently, by mid-1966 Xuyen Moc village and its five hamlets – Bung Rieng, Nhan Tri, Nhan Tam, Nhan Duc and Nhan Nghia – were the only population centres acknowledged as existing by the GVN. A sizeable proportion of the population outside Xuyen Moc village clearly escaped relocation, however, and these people were absorbed into the Front's shadow structure. The Front had party chapters in Thua Thic, Binh Chau and Phuoc Buu, and by mid-1966 over 2000 people were living in these NLF controlled settlements – a not insubstantial number in the context of the rest of the district.[316] By the start of 1967 these 'illegal squatters' (as the government characterised them) had approximately 200 acres of rice and 60 acres of vegetable garden under cultivation.[317] In addition, Phuoc Buu, the biggest squatter location, also served as the major milling location for rice sourced from the Long Dat.[318]

The results of this Front influx in 1965 were mixed. As was the case elsewhere there remained a significant core of support for the Front that stemmed from the usual mixture of tradition, family and displacement. Nguyen Van Nga, a Xuyen Moc guerrilla, is a typical case study in this regard. Born in the village in 1932, he had joined the Viet Minh as a teenager in 1946, before fleeing

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[314] 'Civil Affairs Survey, Phuoc Tuy Province', 23 July 1967; CA/1/3 AWM314.
[315] 'Interrogation Report: Dang Van Dong', undated; 111 AWM314.
[316] Captured Documents (CDEC): Translation Report of Population Data of Xuyen Moc District, Ba Ria Province, 12 February 1967, pp. 1-2; Folder 0503, Box 0101, Vietnam Archive Collection, TTUVA.
[317] Translation of captured document report from 10 ARVN MID, pertaining to anti-hunger plans in Xuyen Moc District, Ba Bien province, 10 November 1967; 154 AWM98.
[318] Preliminary Interrogation Report, Det 1 Div Int Unit, 29 November 1967; 154 AWM98.

Diem's security forces in 1955 and joining the Binh Xuyen remnants. He became a Party member in 1959. Nga's father was in the Viet Minh and he had an uncle and cousins in the Front – four of whom would be killed while serving with C70 in 1966 and 1967.[319] Others, such as those moved from Phuoc Buu, undoubtedly joined in part out of anger at their dispossession.

For the original residents of Xuyen Moc village, however, the arrival of the Front in 1965 was a very dubious blessing. Although nearly 4,000 acres were farmed in and around the village, Xuyen Moc lacked an extensive paddy system and did not produce a rice surplus. The economy relied on the export of secondary crops to Dat Do, and timber products to the rest of the province and beyond. By mid-1966, NLF interdiction and taxation had almost entirely shut this trade down. Villagers travelling along Route 23 to Dat Do were taxed just outside of Xuyen Moc and faced the challenge of crossing the Song Rai river and its tributaries without the help of bridges, which had been blown up by the Front.[320] Consequently Xuyen Moc was always noted by Australians as being more friendly than other villages, despite being exposed to the same dynamics of tradition and intimidation as pro-NLF areas further south, and throughout the war the population consistently demonstrated more enthusiasm for pacification initiatives than was the norm. An Australian soldier reported a conversation he had had with a retired ARVN Major on politics in Xuyen Moc in 1970:

> He stated due to it's [sic] isolation Xuyen Moc was in general not very impressed with political ideologies of any kind. The majority of the villagers could see little difference between the systems, due to illiteracy, and greater concern over their own affairs eg harvests, prices of seeds/food etc. He further added that the work on schoolhouses, windmills and roads made more impression on the villagers than news from any outside source did.[321]

This is not to say that Xuyen Moc was ever a government stronghold in the manner of Binh Gia. But perhaps more than anywhere else in the province, the

[319] 'Personal Biography, Nguyen Van Nga', 13 October 1969; 191 AWM304.
[320] Annex D to 1ATF R569/116, 'Xuyen Moc – VC Resupply System [Map]', 21 April 1967; 1/4/36 PART 2 AWM95.
[321] SGT Johnstone, 'Ground Report – Xuyen Moc', 10-11 November 1970, AWM304 28.

residents of the district came close to matching the vision of the 'rational peasant' that underpinned so much of the pacification program.

The majority of the province population resided in the villages of Long Dien, Dat Do, and the settlements on either side of the Long Hai hills. The RVN divided the area into two districts, Long Dien and Dat Do, centred on their respective villages. The Front, on the other hand, viewed the area as continuous – the 'Long Dat', a more accurate reflection of the similarities between the two districts.[322] The Long Dat encompassed the Long Hai hills, the fishing villages of Lang Phuoc Hai, Phuoc Thinh and Long Hai, and the province's central rice bowl (see Map 2). As well as Long Dien and Dat Do, the latter area included the villages of Tam Phuoc, An Nhut, Phuoc Loi, Long My, Hoi My and Lo Gom. Measuring approximately 10 kilometres east-west, the area was a mixture of small settlements and typical southern Vietnamese rice paddies. Subsidiary crops included pepper, peanuts, bananas and various other fruits. While fishing was the major activity outside of agriculture, secondary industries included salt and rubber production.[323]

The concentration of population and the presence of the valuable fishing industry meant control of the Long Dat area was vital and by 1966, the Front had gained the upper hand. Some of the reasons for this are familiar. The province's first Party chapter had been located in Lang Phuoc Hai, and as shown in Chapter 1 the area had been considered a 'liberated zone' by the Viet Minh for most of the war against the French.[324] The revolutionary tradition was thus well established. The story of Mac Linh Xuan, who as a teenager was a courier for the Long Dat Party Chapter, is similar to that of Nguyen Van Nga, and illustrates the importance of family and tradition in shaping the Party's influence. Interviewed in 2005 for the documentary *Vietnam Minefield*, Xuan described her motivations for joining the Front:

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[322] For a more detailed description see Battle Intelligence Section 1ATF, 'Order of Battle: Long Dat District', 24 June 1970; 199 AWM304.
[323] 'Phuoc Tuy Province Survey', May 1969, p. 8; 300 AWM103.
[324] 'Record of Conversation with Village Chief at Tam Phuoc YS4558 2100 hrs to 2400 hrs 21 Nov 69', 21 November 1969, pp. 1-2; 201/1/15 PART 2 A4531, NAA..

> You could say that I went to join the revolutionary forces when I was only fifteen...and it was through conscience because my family had a revolutionary tradition...[We had] feelings of loathing for foreign enemies who ill-treated our people...arresting and imprisoning people. I, myself, was even arrested when I was only just fourteen...and seeing people beaten, I felt very scared. Being young and seeing all that, and with the family's tradition; my father was shot dead by the French, as was my uncle. Then later came my older brother, he was shot dead by the 'royal' Australians. As a result, I joined out of conscience...mainly because of the feeling of hatred and loathing, that's how it was...[325]

The perceived continuity between the French and the RVN and importance of family ties are once again illustrated. Of equal importance, as stated above, was the proximity of base areas – not just the Long Hais (for reasons expanded on earlier in the chapter) but also the corridor of jungle and scrub formed by the coast and Route 23 that ran away to the west. Known to the Australians as the Light and Long Greens, this corridor formed an important link between the Long Hais, the seaborne infiltration routes that came ashore on the Xuyen Moc coast, and the larger base areas of the province's north. Consequently the Long Dat was easily accessible to Front units.

The importance of rice to the economies of many of the villages in the Long Dat meant that land tenure was also undoubtedly an issue. Writing in early 1971, Australian agricultural expert Geoffrey Fox noted that:

> The effect of market incentives for increased and improved production can be greatly reduced, if a large share of the farmers' income passes to landlords. At present most of the rice farms in the Long Le, Long Dien and Dat Do districts are operated by tenant farmers. Rents are usually calculated in advance of production and range from ¼ to 1/3 of the estimated gross product. Since tenants are usually held responsible for most or all of the rent, when production fails to meet this estimate they face eviction or extensive indebtedness to the landlord.[326]

Frustratingly, precise data is sparse, an indication perhaps of the lack of attention paid to the issue by American and Australian advisers. A survey undertaken by the Civil Affairs section of 1ATF in July 1967 found that 97.34%

[325] Glasshouse transcripts, Tape 9, pp.6–7, quoted in Lockhart, *The Minefield*, p. 96.
[326] Geoffrey B. Fox, 'The Agricultural Development of Phuoc Tuy Province, South Vietnam', March 1971, p. 36; 101 AWM304.

of the population in Dat Do and 93.66% in Long Dien rented land, but gives no indication as to the use this land was put to.[327] A survey of the province undertaken by members of the CORDS Advisory Team in October 1970 (before a significant amount of land had been redistributed in Phuoc Tuy under the March 1970 Land-to-the-Tiller laws) provided data by village rather than district, but remained imprecise. Nevertheless, what data does exist supports Fox's characterisation. While only a minority of farmers in Dat Do, Long Dien and some villages of Long Le were 'pure' tenants who owned no land, the majority of farmers did rent and cultivate land in addition to what they owned in order to supplement their income.[328]

Writing in the introduction to the 1971 Phuoc Tuy Province Survey, compiled by 1 Psy Ops Unit of 1ATF and by far the most comprehensive, hamlet-by-hamlet survey undertaken by the Australians, Captain P.R. Hudson noted that 'regrettably, the unit has come into this theatre far too late since the information which has been gained would have been of operational significance some five to seven years ago'.[329] It is an entirely accurate observation. As has been shown in this chapter, Phuoc Tuy, despite its comparatively small size, had a complex social, political and economic weave. The response of villages and hamlets and the individuals within them to the rise of the Front after 1959 and the corresponding return of the Party varied greatly depending on their particular circumstances. Support for the Front in the Long Dat region must surely have stemmed in part from the Front's land reform policies, which would have greatly benefited the tenant farmers who formed the bulk of those communities. On the other hand, the unusual levels of enthusiasm consistently displayed in Xuyen Moc towards the pacification programme from 1967 onwards almost certainly reflected the economic hardship imposed on the village by the Front's policies of taxation and interdiction.

[327] 'Civil Affairs Survey – Phuoc Tuy Province', 23 July 1967; CA/1/3 AWM314.
[328] The numbers are provided per village for every village – see 'District HES Evaluation', 23 October 1970; HES 1970 (1), Box 1577, A1 731, RG 472, NARA.
[329] CAPT P.R. Hudson, 'Introduction', p. 1; in *Province Survey*; 56 AWM304.

There were also, however, other powerful motivators for political allegiance. Tradition, family allegiance and legacies of service were crucial both in motivating individuals and wider communities. Phuoc Tuy's status as a 'liberated zone' during the war against the French led to many families having ties to the Party, and the events of 1955–1959 – where Diem conflated the Viet Minh and the Party and was, as a result, identified by many peasants with external imperialism – ensured that service in the Front was seen as a continuation of this tradition. This revolutionary tradition was undoubtedly widespread in the province and has been widely emphasised in some accounts.[330] Yet the other side should not be discounted. Lieutenant Colonel Dat is emblematic of the other side of this tradition, something his status as a transplanted Northerner should not detract from. By 1966 transplanted Northerners, almost all of them Catholics, represented a significant minority within the province; and this grafting of external, anti-Communist populations into the province would become a significant part of the pacification program in later years. Equally, however, the role of force and simple geography should not be discounted. The growth of the Front's military forces, the programs of violence and intimidation directed against government officials and the establishment of secure base areas on the fringes of populated zones all ensured compliance with the insurgency. By 1966 the NLF had the military power to enforce its will in most of the province, ensuring it – and not the RVN – now assumed the role of 'government' based on a monopoly of force. Overt resistance was extremely dangerous, as the experience of Binh Gia demonstrated.

Whether pacification had the flexibility to deal with the complexity of Phuoc Tuy remained to be seen. The next chapter examines the events of 1966 and 1967 in the province and the way the arrival of first American and then Australian forces in Phuoc Tuy transformed the situation in Phuoc Tuy. Free World military power ended the Front's overt presence in Long Phuoc and challenged its control of scattered, remote populations. But this military power also created dilemmas, as successive Australian Task Force commanders

[330] See for example Lockhart, *The Minefield*, Ch 7.

struggled to reconcile military needs with pacification objectives. At the same time, this period saw the nascent Revolutionary Development program begin to be implemented in Phuoc Tuy. The program's ability to adapt to the reality of Vietnamese village life would be a key test for pacification as it began to expand.

Chapter 5. Preparing the Battlefield

January 1966–December 1967

'Preparing the battlefield' was the term used by then-Brigadier S.C. Graham, the second commander of 1 Australian Task Force, to describe his operational concept for pacification in Phuoc Tuy.[331] If the term was Graham's, the idea was not. Firmly rooted in Australian doctrine, 'preparing the battlefield' involved breaking the links between Communist main force units and village infrastructure, creating an environment in which Front units would be forced to act and react on 1ATF's terms. Graham's concept was shared by his predecessor, Brigadier O.D. Jackson, and this chapter shows how it governed much of what the Task Force did for its first eighteen months in the province.

More broadly, 'preparing the battlefield' also described what happened throughout Phuoc Tuy in the two years between US escalation in 1965 and the Tet Offensive of February 1968. The 1966–67 period saw fundamental shifts in the nature of the war in Phuoc Tuy that laid the foundations for the sustained pacification campaigns of 1968–71. The arrival of first US and then Australian and New Zealand forces in the province ended the Front's military dominance and allowed the restoration of government control, however superficial, throughout the province. Although still able to freely access most of the villages in the province, the Front was no longer able to seriously contest either large-scale penetrations of its base areas or the relocation of populations it had controlled previously. These relocations, undertaken repeatedly by Vietnamese, American and Australian units during the period covered by this chapter, changed the human geography of the province. Although they succeeded in their objective of restoring government control over thousands of individuals, the bitterness generated by these forced relocations lingered in Phuoc Tuy –

[331] Transcript of interview with MAJGEN S. C. Graham in Canberra by LTCOL R.F. Morison, 29 March 1972, p. 10; 2 AWM107.

creating the political and social conditions that helped define the next six years of pacification.

This chapter also explores the impact of Revolutionary Development and other non-military aspects of pacification on Phuoc Tuy. The arrival of Free World forces in Phuoc Tuy at the beginning of 1966 coincided with the revitalisation of pacification in the aftermath of the Honolulu Conference. The centrepiece of this renewed effort was the Revolutionary Development program, but it also included civic action from 1ATF and paramilitary efforts designed to eliminate the Front's political infrastructure. Although not outright failures, the poor performance of these programs in achieving their goals not only in Phuoc Tuy but nationwide prompted subtle but significant changes from late 1968 onwards in the way pacification was conducted. Critically, the limited impact of Revolutionary Development in Phuoc Tuy also showed the way in which the diagnoses of the grievances generating support for the Front were wrong. Although villagers in Phuoc Tuy would show a degree of personal appreciation for the material and medical benefits Revolutionary Development and civic action brought them, their allegiances did not change because the key sources of their grievances – such as land tenure and government corruption – had not been addressed.

By mid-1966, it was clear to the leadership of the Vietnamese Workers Party that the GO-GU strategy (detailed in Chapter 1) had failed. Although the military forces built up in the south from late 1963 onwards had achieved a number of significant military victories over the ARVN, most notably at Binh Gia in December 1964/January 1965, this had not led to a 'general uprising' and had precipitated rather than pre-empted US involvement.[332] The steady influx of US troops into South Vietnam in 1965, and the battlefield victories they won against PAVN and PLAF regulars – particularly in the Pleiku campaign – underlined the need for a new strategy that would work towards securing the withdrawal of US troops. Consequently, in June 1966 the Central Committee issued Resolution 13, which codified the new 'talk-fight' strategy. The

[332]Nguyen, *Hanoi's Wars*p. 75.

resolution called for PAVN and PLAF military victories against ARVN and FWMAF units that would give the DRV the upper hand at the negotiating table, convincing the Johnson Administration to withdraw from South Vietnam, and creating the conditions in which a neutralist coalition government could be installed in Saigon as a precursor to reunification.[333] The targets for these military victories were certainly ambitious. In early 1966, the Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN) military party committee had decreed that 30–40,000 US and 200,000 South Vietnamese and Allied troops were to be annihilated, and that a recruitment drive was to bring the strength of local guerrilla and district troops to around 450,000; and these targets remained in place, even after the shift to 'talk-fight' in the middle of the year.[334]

The reading of the strategic situation at MACV headquarters was not dissimilar to that in Hanoi. In September 1965, General Westmoreland had outlined a three-phase process for winning the war. Phase I called for urgent military action against PAVN and PLAF main force units to forestall the imminent collapse of the RVN and allow a build-up of both US forces and supporting infrastructure. By January 1966, Westmoreland believed this had been accomplished. This meant Phase II, a sustained strategic offensive against PLAF/PAVN main force units and base areas, could begin.[335] Crucially, this offensive was to be carried out primarily by US and Free World forces. RVNAF forces were to undertake the less demanding territorial security role, providing direct support to the pacification process, which in 1966 concentrated on four national priority areas – Saigon, and parts of the Mekong Delta, II Corps and I Corps areas.[336]

It was against this backdrop that Australian and other Free World military units entered Phuoc Tuy in 1966, with the US Army conducting three operations prior to and during 1ATF's deployment into the province. Operation ABILENE, conducted by the 2nd and 3rd Brigades of the 1st Infantry Division,

[333] Wilkins, *Grab Their Belts to Fight Them*, p. 134.
[334] Wilkins, *Grab Their Belts to Fight Them,* pp. 135–136.
[335] Carland, *Stemming the Tide*, p. 69.
[336] Carland, *Stemming the Tide*, p. 152.

between 30 March and 15 April, was a search-and-destroy mission aimed at the 5th VC Division in its Hat Dich and May Tao base areas.[337] Operation HARDIHOOD was conducted by the 173rd Airborne Brigade to screen the arrival of 1ATF at Nui Dat between 17 and 21 May.[338] Finally Operation HOLLANDIA, also undertaken by 173rd between 9 and 17 June, was a sweep of the Long Hai hills.[339] These three operations demonstrated two important points. The first is the way the arrival of Free World forces fundamentally altered the balance of power in Phuoc Tuy, as the NLF's overt presence in the province proved to be extremely vulnerable to the mobility and firepower of US units. The second was the way in which these operations illustrated the strategic and operational dilemmas facing US commanders in their efforts to support pacification – dilemmas that were to remain throughout the war and prove to be just as problematic for 1ATF.

Front cadre and soldiers in Phuoc Tuy had begun to prepare for this new phase of the war well in advance of the arrival of US troops in the province. The Dat Do history records that the objectives for the NLF in the province were to 'continuously attack the enemy forces, put effort into building our revolutionary infrastructure, firmly hold the resistance bases, attack the enemy's pacification programme, and destroy the Americans' strength and their means of warfare'.[340] In D445,

> the leadership…was directly instructed by the Provincial Unit to deeply examine all aspects and strengthen and adjust the unit's operation methods and tactics. Although the battalion had yet to clash with the American infantry, the companies were directed to thoroughly absorb the combat ideology, develop a spirit of initiative and creativeness in their methods of attack, and increase the dispersal of their teams and sub-elements in order to swiftly attack the enemy.[341]

This was not mere revolutionary bluster, however. *Dat Do* goes on to note that:

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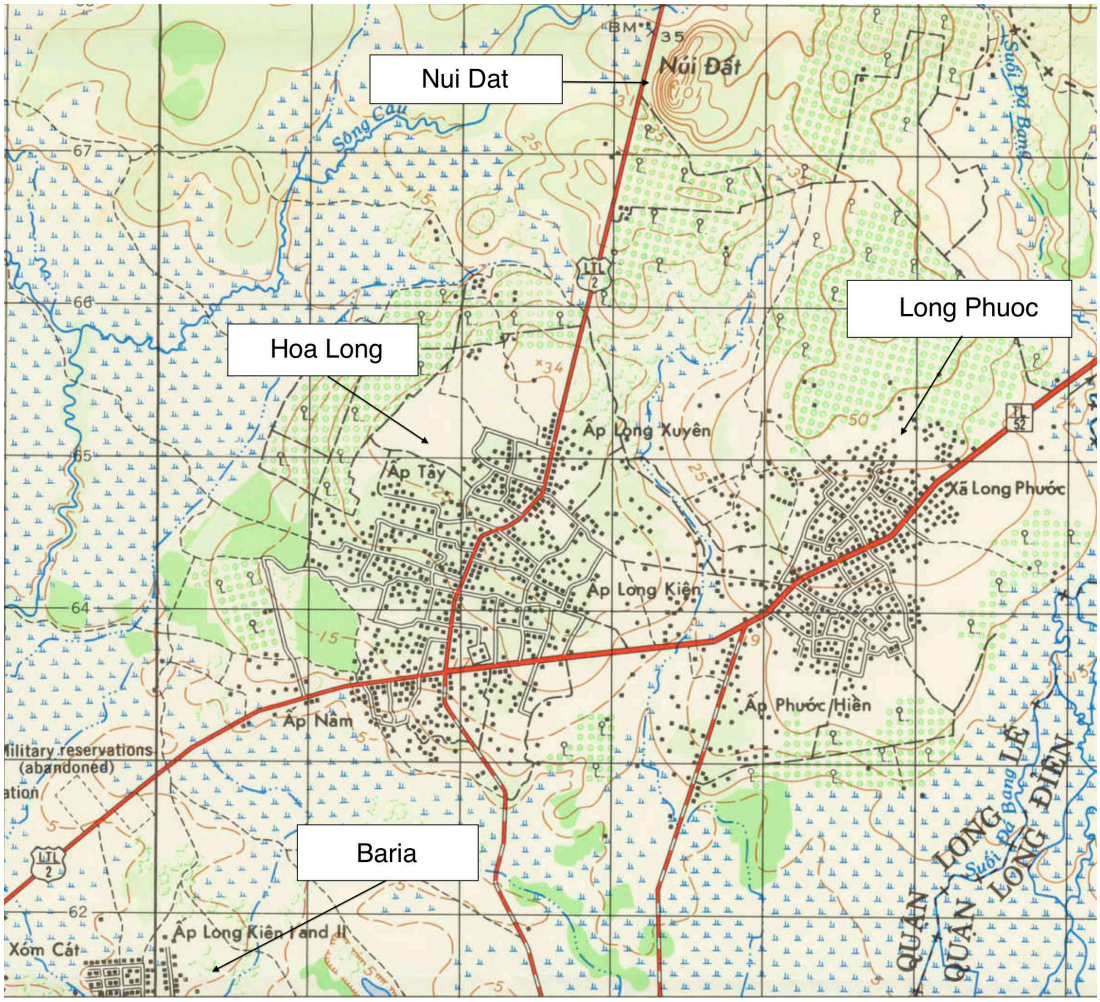
[337] Breen, *First to Fight*, pp. 236–238.
[338] McNeill, *To Long Tan,* pp. 244–249.
[339] United States Adjutant-General's Office 'Operation HOLLANDIA Combat After Action Report', in *U.S. Armed Forces in Vietnam 1954–1975: Part three, Vietnam: reports of U.S. Army operations*, , University Publications of America, Frederick, 1983.
[340] Huong (ed), *The History of the Struggle*, p. 16.
[341]Chamberlain, *The Viet Cong D445 Battalion*, p. 31

> a number of our soldiers and people were still concerned and worried that the Americans would…directly deploy American expeditionary troops into the fighting with their weapons, equipment, modern combat methods, and maximum fire support…how to defeat the Americans was still a big question for the Party Chapters, the people, and our armed forces.[342]

These concerns proved well founded. While the Front's liberated zones had been able to withstand ARVN pressure between 1963 and 1965, they proved hopelessly vulnerable to US and FWMAF efforts. The Dat Do history states that 'on 17 March 1966, the enemy's aircraft bombed and wiped out the Long My liberated village, killing many villagers and our cadre and soldiers'.[343] Although the allegations of atrocities within the Communist account need to be treated with caution, and no mention of the destruction of the village appears in contemporary American documents, the basic story appears to be true.[344] Long My was destroyed by Allied firepower and its residents relocated to the neighbouring hamlets of Hai Truong, Hoi My and Ba Dap; the ruined village remained unoccupied for the remainder of the war. This was followed, during the US Operation ABILENE, by the relocation of the populace of Long Tan to neighbouring government-controlled hamlets, with US units acting as a screen for the relocation process.

[342] Huong (ed), *The History of the Struggle*, p. 16.
[343] Huong (ed), *The History of the Struggle*, p. 17.
[344] Long My, although still clearly marked on maps of the province, is not mentioned on surveys and censuses from 1966 onwards.



Map 4 - Hoa Long, Long Phuoc and Nui Dat, 1966. The fringes of Baria can be seen in the bottom left. The base of Nui Dat, although not marked, was around the hill that gave it its name. Source: Edited Inset 'Xa Binh Ba' [Map] 1/4/46 AWM95.

The fate of Long My and Long Tan foreshadowed that of Long Phuoc [see Map 4]. As was detailed in Chapter Three, Long Phuoc was the centre of support for the NLF within Phuoc Tuy at the time and the seat of the Long Dat Party Committee. Its proximity to the newly chosen Australian base at Nui Dat posed a problem, however, and 1ATF commander Brigadier O.D. Jackson requested that the population of the village be resettled. Consequently, on 17 May the two battalions of the 173rd were airlifted into the vicinity of Nui Dat and immediately moved towards Long Phuoc. D445 was in the area and although apparently surprised by the American arrival, moved to intercept. Yet the paratroopers of the 173rd were of a different calibre than the ARVN troops D445 had previously faced. The brigade was an elite unit that had already spent nearly a year in combat in Vietnam. Liberally equipped with automatic weapons

and artillery, armour and air support, it had a well-earned reputation for aggression and outnumbered the defenders.[345] Consequently, the US force was able to force D445 rapidly back and establish a cordon around Long Phuoc, allowing an ARVN battalion to enter the village and begin evacuating the residents. Despite stiff resistance from both local guerrillas and elements of D445, by 21 June Long Phuoc had been cleared. Half of the 3,000 or so inhabitants were relocated to Ap Nam hamlet in Hoa Long; the remainder were relocated, like the inhabitants of Long Tan, to Dat Do or Long Dien.[346]

Long Phuoc was subsequently physically destroyed by the 6th Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (6RAR) during Operation ENOGERRA, between 21 June and 5 July. The overt reason for the evacuation and destruction of the village was Brigadier O.D. Jackson's wish to create a buffer zone around the Nui Dat base. As official historian Ian McNeill explained:

> The clearance of inhabitants from around the base was to create a protective zone in which close patrols could operate freely, permitting the task force to fire its weapons in defence of the base without fear of hitting civilians…It would also prevent a well-known Viet Cong ploy – firing mortars from within inhabited areas, thus preventing retaliatory fire. The limit of the cleared area was known as Line Alpha.[347]

While this is true in a narrow sense, it is not an entirely satisfactory explanation. Line Alpha detoured around the northern half of Hoa Long, and indeed on 12 June a 5th Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (5RAR) patrol was mortared from within the village – the 'well-known ploy' being used to full effect.[348] Because Hoa Long remained nominally controlled by the government it was, however, not evacuated. McNeill was closer to the truth when he wrote that '[Province Chief] Dat had long wanted to remove the people of Long Tan and Long Phuoc from Viet Cong control where they provided support to the insurgents, and to bring them into an area of government authority…but he did

[345] Breen, *First to Fight,* pp. 21–22; Breen also provides a case study of the differences in Australian and American operational methodology at pp. 164–165.
[346] McNeill, *To Long Tan,* p. 245.
[347] McNeill, *To Long Tan*, p. 241.
[348] McNeill, *To Long Tan*, p. 253.

not have the troop strength to do so.'[349] For Dat, the arrival of Free World forces in the province was an opportunity to remove the protective shield of the liberated zones and bring the populations within them back under his control. Thus, while Jackson's motivations were undoubtedly sincere, the destruction of Long Phuoc and Long Tan are best understood not as an expression of Australian doctrine but as part of a larger process in which Front liberation areas were physically destroyed and their populations brought back under government control – both within Phuoc Tuy and South Vietnam as a whole.

Meanwhile, continuing American operations in Phuoc Tuy again illustrated the strategic, operational and tactical dilemmas faced by US and Australian commanders. Critics have viewed Westmoreland's three-phase strategy as fundamental proof of the way that he, MACV and the US Army more broadly misunderstood the nature of counterinsurgency and instead were fixated on prosecuting a 'conventional' war.[350] The reality is more complex. Westmoreland clearly saw pacification as central to the conduct of the war – a point he emphasised when he conceived the three-phase plan in September 1965, in the 1966 Combined Campaign Plan and in subsequent guidance.[351] Yet where some contemporaries – notably the commander of 3rd Marine Amphibious Force, Lieutenant General W. Walt, and other senior Marine Corps commanders – and later critics argued the best way for US/FWMAF to support pacification was through population security, Westmoreland and MACV saw aggressive operations against PLAF/PAVN main force units and the base areas they inhabited as being the most efficient use of US/FWMAF mobility and firepower.[352] Westmoreland outlined this view in a directive to 2nd Field Force Vietnam (IIFFV) in July 1966:

> The role of the military in Revolutionary Development is to create an environment within which there is sufficient security to pursue programs for expanding government control. Search and destroy

[349] McNeill, *To Long Tan*, p. 242.
[350] Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam,* pp. 165–167.
[351] Andrew Birtle, 'PROVN, Westmoreland, and the Historians', *The Journal of Military History,* Vol. 72, No. 4, 2008, pp. 1219–1221.
[352] Daddis, *No Sure Victory*, pp. 93–94. See also Michael A. Hennessy, *Strategy in Vietnam: The Marines and Revolutionary Warfare in I Corps, 1965-1972.* Praeger, Westport, 1997.

> operations by US and FWMAF tactical units are designed primarily to engage main force enemy units, but they too should be planned to complement to the maximum extent possible the overall plan for security in the Corps Tactical Zone.[353]

In other words, US and Free World units were to create the security necessary for Revolutionary Development to succeed by destroying main force units and base areas, not through static or population security missions. This was reinforced by a subsequent directive issued in July by IIFFV to subordinate formations, including 1ATF, which stated that 'while it is highly desirable that United States and Free World Military Assistance Forces assist in the Revolutionary Development program, the primary mission of these forces…is the destruction of the Viet Cong. The effectiveness of United States and Free World Military Assistance Forces in this effort must not be dissipated through undue emphasis on their use as security forces'.[354]

There was merit to this view. MACV dismissed the 'enclave' arguments put forward by both the US Marines and external observers such as retired Lieutenant General James Gavin, as requiring more troops than were available and handing the initiative to the Communists.[355] So too, the 1965 campaigns had seemingly demonstrated that the most effective use of US and Free World units was in aggressive action against main force units and base areas, disrupting Communist logistics and forcing them onto the operational defensive. Nonetheless, this emphasis on offensive action had some far-reaching negative consequences at operational and tactical level. As Gregory Daddis has argued, MACV's measurement of progress through basic military statistics – such as the infamous 'body count' – created an incentive structure in which commanders at an operational and tactical level focused solely on the destruction of the enemy and neglected pacification.[356]

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[353] MACV (Gen Westmoreland) to IIFFV, 'Military Support for Revolutionary Development', 4 July 1966; R569/1/6 AWM103.
[354] MAJGEN Seaman, CG IIFFV, to subordinate units (1ID, 25ID, 173d and 1ATF), 'Military Support for Revolutionary Development', 16 July 1966; R569/1/6 AWM103.
[355] Daddis, *No Sure Victory*, pp. 93–94.
[356] Daddis, *No Sure Victory,* pp. 84–85.

This was amply demonstrated by US operations in Phuoc Tuy in 1966. Although US military dominance substantially shifted the balance of power in the province away from the Front, neither the 173rd nor the 1st Infantry Division conducted pacification operations in any sustained way, instead concentrating on finding and destroying enemy main force units.[357] The effectiveness of the military clearance 'sweeps' through base areas also remains open to question. Operation ABILENE saturated the Hat Dich/May Tao corridor with six infantry battalions and was one of the largest operations in Phuoc Tuy throughout the war. Despite this, it generated just one significant contact, and disruption of the 5th VC Division's logistics was not sufficient to prevent the attack by 275th VC Regiment and supporting elements just a few months later at Long Tan.

The dilemma of how best to support pacification also faced Australian commanders. The two men who would command 1ATF for its first 18 months in Phuoc Tuy, Brigadier O.D. Jackson and Brigadier S.C. Graham, had their own conceptions of the correct way to fight the war in Vietnam, visions strongly anchored in Australian doctrine and experience. On the face of it, their concept was not radically different to Westmoreland's. In a message to IIFFV in late July 1966, Jackson outlined 1ATF's mission as being:

> a. Locating and destroying both VC main force and guerrillas and,
> b. Providing sufficient security to permit effective Revolutionary Development activity certainly in the priority areas.[358]

Both Jackson and Graham also recognised the importance of the main force units. After the war Jackson noted that '[D445] were the mail [sic] fist behind the claws that were in the village people themselves' and that the developmental aspects of pacification were impossible to undertake without 'some basic degree of security'.[359]

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[357] United States Adjutant-General's Office, 'Operation HOLLANDIA' and US Adjutant 'Operation ABILENE' Combat After Action Report', in *U.S. Armed Forces in Vietnam 1954–1975: Part three, Vietnam: reports of U.S. Army operations,* University Publication of America, Frederick.
[358] BRIG Jackson to IIFFV, 'Military Support for Revolutionary Development', 22 July 1966; R569/1/6 AWM103.
[359] Transcript of interview with BRIG Jackson by LTCOL R.F. Morrison, 9 March 1972, Sydney, p. 59; 2 AWM107.

The difference between the Jackson/Graham methodology and its American counterpart was more in *how* these objectives were to be achieved. The Australians spurned the simplistic measurements that came to dominate MACV during this time. As Graham subsequently recollected:

> I didn't believe that this ['our mission is to kill VC'] was my mission, which I felt, was to help to ensure the security of the main areas of population and resources of Phuoc Tuy and so enable the Government to restore law and order and get on with the job of developing the social, economical, and political life of the province. Inevitably that would involve killing VC but it would be only one of the ways, and sometimes not necessarily the most important way, for achieving our mission…[360]

Jackson made a similar judgement: 'The local villager…did we give them any form of security which is going to last for years to come? Did we help them physically to a better way of life?...I think we'll be judged on those things rather than the main battles we fought against the VC forces.'[361]

Rather, the way the Australians intended to destroy both local and main forces in Phuoc Tuy, and thus ensure the security of the pacification effort, was through 'interpos[ing] ourselves between the main force of the VC conventional force and the people of the province'.[362] Graham explained it as 'the breaking of the links between the main and local forces':

> Each force is so completely dependent on the other, in the communist concept of revolutionary warfare, that destroying one, in fact, destroys the other, or at least renders it impotent. Destroying the main force was, at that stage, a pipe dream…Hence our concept of operations had to be to concentrate our efforts on the local forces, to disrupt the links between the Province battalion, the district companies and the hamlet guerrillas and break up the whole spider-web infrastructure on which these rested. If we could be successful in this we would deprive the main forces of their supplies; their information; their recruits; their contact with the people and their prestige.[363]

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[360] Interview with MAJGEN Graham, 29 March 1971, pp. 8–9; 2 AWM107.
[361] Interview with BRIG O.D. Jackson, 9 March 1972, p. 58; 2 AWM107.
[362] Interview with BRIG O.D. Jackson, 9 March 1972, p. 51; 2 AWM107.
[363] Interview with MAJGEN Graham, 29 March 1971, pp. 8–9; 2 AWM107.

By attacking these links and separating the two, the commanders of 1ATF hoped to offer the Front a stark choice: 'the option of accepting continual losses of men and materials and loss of influence over the main lines of communication, or alternatively of reacting by attacking 1ATF'.[364] Graham thus cast this operational concept as a basic military principle transposed into a counterinsurgency context. By restricting Front access to the population and resources of Phuoc Tuy he was creating a 'prepared battlefield' in which the Communists would have to fight on Australian terms.[365] As Jackson put it in his message to IIFFV in July 1966: 'Whichever course [the enemy] chooses he will be destroyed while at the same time Revolutionary Construction activities can progress as fast as effective resources can be provided.'[366]

While Jackson and Graham may have had a clear idea of their operational concept, external factors prevented its full implementation until the second half of 1967. When 1ATF arrived in Phuoc Tuy in June 1966 its immediate priorities were to establish and secure the Nui Dat base and protect US units as they disembarked at Vung Tau. These tasks stretched the Task Force to its limits. The need to defend Nui Dat meant only a single infantry battalion at a time could be deployed on operations, and Jackson lacked both supporting armour and an adequate task force headquarters. In addition, the Task Force suffered severe logistical shortages in its first six months in the province. By the time Graham assumed command in January 1967, the arrival of the US 9th Infantry Division in Bien Hoa and the 11th Armoured Cavalry Regiment (ACR) in Long Khanh had reduced the overall security risk to the Task Force, and earlier logistical issues had largely been rectified. Nonetheless, the absence of a third infantry battalion, supporting heavy armour and an adequate headquarters staff was to continue to be a major hindrance to 1ATF operations until the end of 1967.

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[364] BRIG Jackson to IIFFV, 'Military Support for Revolutionary Development', 22 July 1966; R569/1/6 AWM103.
[365] Interview with MAJGEN Graham, 29 March 1971, p. 10; 2 AWM107.
[366] BRIG Jackson to IIFFV, 'Military Support for Revolutionary Development', 22 July 1966; R569/1/6 AWM103.

Jackson was also hindered in the second half of 1966 by the threat of enemy main force units. COSVN clearly saw 1ATF as both a threat and an opportunity, and so a major objective of the 5th VC Division was 'to coordinate with the Ba Ria local armed forces and to attack the Australian military forces that were extending their control and replacing the US forces in progressing their pacification plans in Ba Ria'.[367] Consequently, in June 1966 the 274th VC Regiment was deployed forward to defend the Hat Dich base area, while 275th moved from Long Khanh into Phuoc Tuy with the objective of attacking Nui Dat. Although the intelligence picture of enemy forces facing 1ATF was initially overinflated, by August the threat posed by the 5th Division had become clear.[368]

The saga of, and controversies surrounding, the resulting battle at Long Tan have been well documented.[369] On 18 August D Company 6RAR encountered 275 Regiment in Long Tan rubber plantation, roughly 7km east of Nui Dat. In a protracted engagement in which D Company was nearly overrun, at least 245 soldiers from 275 Regiment and D445 were killed, mostly by artillery fire, and a further three captured. 1ATF lost 18 dead and 24 wounded.[370] The battle rendered the 275th temporarily unfit for combat, and although the 274th regiment remained largely intact, Jackson did not face a significant main force threat for the rest of his tenure. Nevertheless, Long Tan showed the dangers posed by main force units. The loss of D Company would have been a significant military defeat for 1ATF and would have had serious political ramifications in Australia.

After he assumed command of 1ATF from Jackson, Graham faced a less significant main force threat, but it was still real enough – a point underlined in two attacks approximately a month apart. On 17 February an unidentified Communist force attacked the Regional Forces post at Lang Phuoc Hai. Efforts

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[367] See Annex I, Pham Quang Dinh, *Lich Su Su Doan Bo Binh 5 (1965-2005) [The History of the 5th Infantry Division 1965-2005]*, in Chamberlain, *The Viet Cong D445 Battalion*.
[368] Interview with BRIG O.D. Jackson, 9 March 1972, p. 74; 2 AWM107.
[369] McNeill, *To Long Tan,* pp. 305–375, is the definitive account of the battle. See also McAulay, *The Battle of Long Tan* and Bob Buick and Gary McKay, *All Guts and No Glory,* Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 2000.
[370] McNeill, *To Long Tan*, p. 351.

to relieve the post by local RF and ARVN units resulted in more NLF units being encountered. By mid-morning it appeared clear that the NLF units, by now under heavy artillery fire, were withdrawing to the east – through the forested corridor known to the Australians as the 'light green'. Graham resolved to cut off their retreat and so 6RAR was airlifted into the area. Here it fought a pitched battle against elements of D445 Battalion, losing eight soldiers killed and 27 wounded. The battle – known to the Australians as Operation BRIBIE – was a less than resounding success.[371] A month later the Front again tried to lure the Australians into a fight. On this occasion 275th Regiment attacked the Popular Force post at Lo Gom, just to the north of Lang Phuoc Hai. The unexpected presence of US armour in the 'light green', and the stubborn resistance of the defenders at Lo Gom prevented a repetition of BRIBIE. In total, 37 members of 275 were found dead in and around the perimeter of the Lo Gom post, and Graham believed the regiment's poor performance showed how badly it had been affected by Long Tan.[372]

Although the main force threat was declining as the command of 1ATF changed hands, the Task Force remained significantly overstretched. In his handover briefing to Graham, Jackson emphasised that 'the southeast area of Phuoc Tuy from Nui Dat was still pretty much under VC control'. He later reminisced, 'I thought this was his first and major problem – deal with the VC in the south east, this was the penetrating into the Dat Do area, to the Long Hais, this sort of an area.'[373] BRIBIE and the attack on Lo Gom undoubtedly reinforced the point that the NLF enjoyed almost unimpeded access to the Long Dat, at least in Graham's mind. This easy access to Dat Do and Long Dien remained the most obvious challenge to Graham's concept of breaking the links between the populace and the main forces. Yet 1ATF did not have the troops to do this and execute other aspects of Graham's strategy, such as extending security to Xuyen Moc and the outlying villages of Duc Thanh. At the same time

[371]McNeill and Ekins, *On the Offensive,* pp. 90–115.
[372] Interview with MAJGEN Graham, 29 March 1971, pp. 28-29; 2 AWM107. See also LTCOL Jack K. Gilham, 'Combat After Action Report', 14 April 1967; Box 10, A1 122 After Action Reports, RG472, NARA.
[373] Interview with BRIG O.D. Jackson, 9 March 1972, p. 79; 2 AWM107.

Graham remained under pressure from IIFFV and MACV to continue operations against the base areas and main force units on the fringes of the province.[374]

This lack of troops would shape Graham's two most far-reaching and controversial decisions. The first was the building of a minefield between Dat Do and the sea, a distance of some 14 kilometres. In an August 1969 memo, Graham outlined the problem:

> In Phuoc Tuy…the population and resources are concentrated in the small triangle of Baria, Dat Do and Phuoc Hai. The Dat Do/Phuoc Hai complex of villages is the key to this triangle… A well organised VC supply system ran from the Dat Do/Phuoc Hai complex through the area known as the "Long Green" (where his advanced bases for control of the population were normally sited) to transhipment points on Route 23 and then to the main base areas. Control of this complex was therefore given top priority by me as a prerequisite to any hope of success in the Province as a whole. It was this background which produced the "fence".[375]

Indeed, Graham stated after the war that 'the building of the fence and the minefields, to my point of view, was almost a necessity under the circumstances. It was forced upon me.'[376] Graham argued that 'I had to stop that unrestricted flow of supplies. I couldn't do it by people, because I didn't have the people, so I thought we would do it by a physical barrier which at least we can control and which would have only a couple of points of exit and entry.'[377] This was accomplished through the construction of a minefield, 70 to 100 metres wide and cordoned on both sides by a barbed wire fence.

'The minefield' is, behind the decision to commit troops to the conflict in the first place, unarguably the most controversial aspect of Australia's war in Vietnam.[378] The extensive criticism of Graham's decision can be grouped into two main themes. The first might be termed 'tactical' or 'doctrinal'. Brigadier

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[374]McNeill and Ekins, *On the Offensive,* p. 127.
[375] MAJGEN Graham 'Security of the Barrier Minefield', 1 August 1969, p. 1; 776 AWM98.
[376] Interview with MAJGEN Graham, 29 March 1971, p. 40; 2 AWM107.
[377] Interview with MAJGEN Graham, 29 March 1971, p. 40; 2 AWM107.
[378] The controversial nature of the decision is epitomised in Lockhart, *The Minefield*, a polemic that relentlessly criticises Graham and his decision. See also Ekins and McNeill, *Fighting to the Finish,* pp. 243–250 and Murphy, *Harvest of Fear,* pp. 189–192.

S.P. Weir, who commanded 1ATF in 1970 and described the minefield 'as the biggest blunder we made in the Task Force', outlined the problem:

> it gave them [the NLF] a never ending source of supply. Something in the order of 6000 mines were taken out of that minefield from about 20,000…It was made by experienced officers who perhaps should have known better, but neither of whom had had experience in Korea and hadn't realised – therefore didn't have the benefit of the Korean experience – to know the fearful effect of misplaced and misused minefields.[379]

Royal Australian Engineer (RAE) Corps doctrine stressed that minefields needed to be permanently observed and covered by fire, or else the enemy could remove or clear the mines at leisure. As Weir alluded, this lesson had been brutally confirmed to Australian officers in Korea, where minefields – both Communist and Allied – had caused serious problems for Australian infantrymen. One of the officers with this type of experience was Major Brian Florence, who as commander of 1 Field Squadron, RAE, was the man tasked with implementing Graham's idea. When briefed about the construction of the minefield – codenamed Operation LEETON – on 2 March 1967, Florence vigorously objected to the proposal on the basis of doctrine and his own experience in Korea. Graham replied that South Vietnamese units based along Route 44 would patrol the fence and that special anti-lift devices would prevent the mines from being removed.

Florence, however, remained unconvinced and in the event his fears were fully justified. The successful defence of the Lang Phuoc Hai and Lo Gom posts by RF/PF seems to have given Graham an inflated view of the capability of the Territorials in the province, arguing in a message to IIFFV that 'they had not done badly and appear to be improving'.[380] While this may have been true in a narrow sense, RF/PF soldiers rarely left their own wire to patrol, and they would have been hard pressed to cover the full length of the minefield, even had they any desire to do so. The anti-lift devices – in which a hand grenade was

[379] Transcript of interview with BRIG S.P. Weir by LTCOL R.F. Morrison, 13 July 1972, Queenscliff, p. 28; 2 AWM107.
[380] BRIG Graham to COMAFV, 'Advisory Teams in RF Posts', 28 June 1967; R569/1/30 AWM103.

buried underneath a mine so that lifting the mine would trigger the grenade – did initially cause considerable casualties to Front units trying to penetrate the minefield. The Dat Do history records that 'at first, our forces suffered a large number of casualties from this "death fence"… Many of the Province's and District's experienced engineers who were assigned to examine the minefield were unsuccessful or became casualties.'[381] Unaware of the existence of anti-lift devices, Front sappers could not understand why mines detonated while being lifted. It was only with the recovery of a 'dud' grenade that local engineers discovered the anti-lift devices and devised a solution.[382] From then on local Front forces began regularly to lift mines, store them, and then deploy them against Australian patrols.

Graham later argued that reports of the number of mines lifted had been greatly exaggerated and that in any case, the minefield formed but one source in a province awash with undetonated explosives:

> It's alleged we lost all sorts of casualties from our own mines but I would simply point out that this was well known to me and well taken into account when I decided to build the minefield, and the fence. Because there were so many mines floating loose around that countryside at that time – around every culvert and post from French days, and since, even we didn't know where they all were. They weren't charted but we did know of about forty odd minefields that existed of which we had only had reasonable plans of about 15 or 16, as I recall, in which there were thousands of mines. But the VC, one thing he had never been short of, was mines and booby traps.[383]

There was certain logic to this argument, particularly given a number of catastrophic mine incidents that had already hit 1ATF prior to the building of the fence. However, this comment ultimately reinforced the questionable judgement Graham had shown. He had already witnessed the ability of the NLF to take pre-existing mines and unexploded ordnance and fashion them into weapons capable of inflicting great casualties on 1ATF. Rather than make efforts to deny them that weapon, Graham instead gave them an arsenal that

[381] Huong (ed), *The History of the Struggle*, p. 24.
[382] Lockhart, *The Minefield,* p. 98.
[383] Interview with MAJGEN Graham, 29 March 1971, p. 41; 2 AWM107.

would provide 'an endless supply' and cause significant operational problems for 1ATF later in the war.

The other type of criticism often levelled at the Dat Do minefield is primarily ideological, and was championed by Greg Lockhart. In *The Minefield*, published in 2007, Lockhart argues that the barrier minefield was the product of an imperial mentality that conceived of the Communist threat as fundamentally external to Vietnam and consequently looked to impose 'barriers' between them and the population, when in reality they were one and the same thing. Australia's commitment to Vietnam, the Nui Dat base and the minefield were all products of this imperial mentality and fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of the war:

> Or, again in the official history's words, Wilton felt that the role of the task force was to 'separate the enemy from the population' in central and southwestern Phuoc Tuy. There was, however, a fundamental problem with this construction of 1ATF's role that goes to the root of the Australian tragedy in Vietnam. With little idea of the NLF's political strength and strategy, the Australian commanders proved unable to rationalise their understanding of their friends and enemies into a coherent plan of action…The truth indeed was that, 21 years after the Indochina Wars had begun, Wilton and Jackson had overlooked their enemy's political, social and economic base in Phuoc Tuy Province.[384]

Yet this is a tendentious reading of Graham's and Jackson's doctrine. Certainly at one level the Australians conceived of the Front as an external presence – witness Jackson's description of the Front infrastructure being claws sunk into the population – and underestimated the depth of support for the Communists within certain villages in Phuoc Tuy. Despite this, however, 1ATF understood that a strong Communist presence existed in the villages, and the symbiotic nature of the relationship between the village infrastructure and main force units. Indeed, if anything the Australians overestimated the reliance of the latter on the former, overlooking the way in which Front base areas were part of a nationwide logistics system that connected to the Ho Chi Minh trail and other supply lines. The Australians also understood that, by necessity, their role

[384] Lockhart, *The Minefield*, pp. 25–27.

in the war had to be limited to one of security. The role of winning the political war in the villages in 1966–67 belonged to Revolutionary Development. As Graham stated, 1ATF's primary role was to provide security around the populace 'and so enable the Government to restore law and order and get on with the job of developing the social, economical, and political life of the province'.[385]

Moreover, Lockhart's criticism is doubly flawed because while the minefield proved a failure, the idea of 'barriers' proved fundamentally sound. One of the reasons the Long Dat guerrillas accepted so many casualties in trying to breach the Dat Do field was *because* of the immense difficulties that it caused to the Front. As the Dat Do history states:

> The Australians' minefield cut off contact between our District's three regions. The Minh Đạm base was isolated. Our liaison routes between the District and the Province – and reverse, were cut. The fields of Hội Mỹ, Cầu Sa etc were abandoned and could not produce – affecting the livelihoods of the people. In the bases, the revolutionary forces had great difficulty with food supplies. The cadre and soldiers in Long Đất were forced to eat roots, bamboo shoots, and jungle vegetables in lieu of rice.[386]

This account is backed by documents captured by 7th Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (7RAR) and translated by the ARVN 10th Military Intelligence Detachment which confirm the logistical difficulties the minefield caused the Front.[387] More broadly, later Australian attempts to block Front access to villages through a policy of close ambushing were highly successful, demonstrating that the 'barrier' doctrine correctly identified one of the Front's major weaknesses.

Another of Graham's decisions that was to have long-term consequences on pacification in Phuoc Tuoy was Operation AINSLIE, the relocation in late August and early September 1967 of villagers living in a series of hamlets in

[385] Interview with MAJGEN Graham, 29 March 1971, p. 8; 2 AWM107.
[386] Huong (ed), *The History of the Struggle*, p. 24.
[387] English language translation of 'Captured Document Report' from 10 ARVN Military Intelligence Detachment, 30 November 1967; 154 AWM98.

northern Duc Thanh to a new, Australian-built hamlet named Ap Suoi Nghe ('hamlet of sweet water'). The reasons given for the resettlement of these villagers were much the same as for Long Phuoc. Slope 30 lay in the corridor that linked the Hat Dich and May Tao base areas, and so was a frequent scene of 1ATF operations. The presence of a widely dispersed civilian population in this area hindered the use of fire support. This proximity to base areas also meant that the villagers of Slope 30 were a source of both enemy supplies and recruits, with one Australian adviser describing them as 'married quarters' for the Viet Cong.[388] AINSLIE thus became the final example in the now well-established pattern of the forcible relocation of populations in order to deny them to the enemy.[389]

On 7 September Australian troops began to relocate villagers to Ap Suoi Nghe, and over the course of the next six days some 902 people were moved. Correspondent John Bennetts described the villagers as being 'sullen, resentful and confused' as they were loaded onto trucks and driven down Route 2 – complete with materials stripped from their houses and whatever crops could be moved with them.[390] They were deposited onto a large expanse of open dirt that contained 100 half-completed houses. Each of the 206 families involved was given a 15 by 30 metre plot of land that contained a timber frame and an aluminium roof, the remaining house frames being constructed by 1ATF in the following days, and families were expected to finish off these houses on their own, with some help from 1ATF. Fruit and vegetables could be grown on the plot, while land on the outskirts of the village would be made available for crops.[391]

Suoi Nghe came to show both the incompatibility of population relocation with the pacification program in Phouc Tuoy, and the limitations of Australian involvement within it. Australian publications extolled the virtues of the new hamlet, describing it in the language of post-war suburban prosperity:

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[388] Leggett, 'Interview', quoted in McNeill, *The Team*, p. 393.
[389] McNeill and Ekins, *On the Offensive,* p. 223.
[390] McNeill and Ekins, *On the Offensive,* p. 224.
[391] LTCOL J.F. McDonagh, 'Suoi Nghe – a Refugee Hamlet in Vietnam', November 1967, pp. 2–3; R176/1/5/2 PART 2 AWM98.

> The focal point of the village will be a spacious market area flanked by areas set aside for shops. A community area nearby will provide space for a hamlet office and any other government or community buildings. An area has been set aside for recreational purposes and allowance has been made for pagodas, churches, cemetery, school, dispensary and other public utilities.[392]

As historian John Murphy put it, Suoi Nghe was, however, 'a rectangle of right-angled streets which could hardly be more different from the organic growth of older villages…it represented a cultural image of a model Asia, similar to a suburban subdivision, modernised and leaving the past behind'.[393] Here again was pacification as an expression of narrow Western experiences, conceptions and cultural baggage in which a certain type of economic prosperity, or the appearance of it, was perceived as the overriding determinant of political allegiance.

Unsurprisingly, Ap Suoi Nghe's new inhabitants did not respond overly well to this effort at forced western-modelled 'modernisation'. In early 1968 they petitioned 1ATF to be allowed to return to their crops; this was denied on the basis that allowing civilians to return to Slope 30 defeated the entire purpose of the relocation – and that in any case the crops had been destroyed with chemical defoliant.[394] Nor did they adapt well to their new lifestyle. The despair in the reports detailing a series of hygiene inspections of the new hamlet conducted by 1st Australian Civil Affairs Unit (1ACAU) in September and October 1968 is palpable; '[t]he people', the report laments, 'seem to understand well enough the causes of diseases like malaria, dysentery, scabies, worms and impetigo, but other than using mosquito nets and boiling water they don't seem to bother about preventive medicine.'[395]

The other significant problem that the Ap Suoi Nghe project faced in its effort to impose economic prosperity, and therefore win South Vietnamese

[392] McDonagh, 'Suoi Nghe – a Refugee Hamlet in Vietnam', p. 3; R176/1/5/2 PART 2 AWM98.
[393] Murphy, *Harvest of Fear,* pp. 176–177.
[394] Murphy, *Harvest of Fear*, p. 177.
[395] Appendix B – Hygiene Inspection of A and B Blocks, Suoi Nghe, to 'Medical Report for Period 1-31 August 1968', 27 September 1968; R176/1/49 AWM98.

'allegiance', was the absence of conditions conducive to that prosperity. 1ACAU's commander, Lieutenant Colonel J.F. McDonagh, had stated in a November 1967 pamphlet that 'permanent water sources, good drainage and efficient sanitary conditions could be easily developed'.[396] In reality, and in a bitterly ironic twist on the hamlet's name, water was in persistently short supply in Suoi Nghe. Moreover, efforts to grow rice and cash crops failed for a variety of reasons. The traditional highland farming techniques of Suoi Nghe's Montagnard inhabitants were unsuitable for the lowland soil of the new hamlet, and crops suffered persistent fungal and viral damage. The decision to place Suoi Nghe to the west of Route 2 also contributed to the hamlet's economic isolation. The result was that Suoi Nghe was, almost from the beginning, more than a failed experiment in pacification, becoming instead an active factor in opposition to it.

The construction of Suoi Nghe was the first major project undertaken by 1 Australian Civil Affairs Unit (1ACAU), which had only arrived in Vietnam in July 1967. Previously, units within 1ATF and a small Civil Affairs detachment of headquarters staff had undertaken the civic action role. Australian doctrine defined civic action as a program to:

> utilise armed forces' resources for constructive civilian activities such as assisting in health, welfare, and public works projects, improving living conditions, alleviating suffering and improving the economic base of the country. In addition, the program seeks to gain the support, loyalty and respect of the people for the armed forces and to emphasise the concept of freedom and worth of the individual.[397]

Even relatively small military units such as 1ATF possessed tremendous economic power compared to the civilian populations they were based around, and a comparatively tiny outlay of Australian resources could make an enormous difference to local Vietnamese. As one Australian officer told historian Frank Frost, civic action cost the task force an estimated $250,000 per

[396] McDonagh, 'Suoi Nghe – a Refugee Hamlet in Vietnam', p. 3; R176/1/5/2 PART 2 AWM98.
[397] *The Division in Battle, Pamphlet No. 11, Counter-Revolutionary Warfare,* Canberra, 1965, p. 86, quoted in Frank Frost, *Australia's War in Vietnam*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1987, p. 165.

month, against a daily ammunition expenditure of $15,000.[398] Civic action was also seen as a 'positive' contribution to the war, and rapidly became the public face of 1ATF's participation in pacification.

How effective such civic action was in achieving its aims remains open to question. The Task Force summarised the mission of civic action as 'to win the support of the local population for the government of South Vietnam with a subsidiary aim of obtaining goodwill towards our forces and Australia generally'.[399] Certainly, there was evidence that it generated some goodwill towards 1ATF. One of the most successful elements of civic action were Medical Civil Affairs Program (MEDCAP), in which Task Force doctors and medical personnel visited villages and provided free medical check-ups. In September 1967, for example, 3,823 patients and 289 dental patients were examined by personnel from 1ACAU and other Australian units. Some 620 patients were immunised for cholera, and some 37 were evacuated to hospital for treatment. 1ACAU's monthly report stated that 'after 10 weeks routine MEDCAP visits response by local population excellent', and that a 'good response to continual medical treatment is most apparent in the isolated MONTAGNARD community of VINH THANH'.[400] Other civic action projects also had some effect. The Australian 161st Reconnaissance Flight was given the job of civic action in Xuyen Moc, which remained physically isolated even after Operation PORTSEA opened Route 23 in April 1967. The Australians distributed gifts to the poor, provided medical assistance, purchased local wooden goods and helped repair several broken water pumps over the course of routine visits between June and August 1967. By the end of August they found that 'the atmosphere at Xuyen Moc is noticeably friendly with people addressing the CA Team by their names'.[401]

Efforts to replicate this attitude in other areas were, however, generally less successful. The Task Force made Hoa Long a civic action priority due to its

[398] Frost, *Australia's War in Vietnam,* p. 164.
[399] 'Civil Affairs in Phuoc Tuy Province, South Vietnam 1967/68', undated; 268 AWM314.
[400] 'Civil Affairs – Phuoc Tuy Province – Quarterly Report – Period Ending 30/9/67', 9 September 1967; R176A/1/7 AWM 314.
[401] 161 Recce Flt to 1ATF, 'Civic Action Activities', Aug 67; R176A/2/5 AWM314.

proximity to Nui Dat and status as a contested village. As well as routine civic action activity such as MEDCAPs and the distribution of commodities, the Task Force repaired school buildings, levelled and widened paths, and constructed a village marketplace.[402] Many villagers, when asked about their feelings towards 1ATF by a Vietnamese survey team in early 1967, remarked favourably on the discipline and generosity of the Australians. Yet once again one of the central pillars of pacification – the securing of allegiance through material largesse – collapsed in the face of political realities. Villagers were unhappy with travel restrictions that prevented them from reaching their land and military action that destroyed crops and killed livestock. Some villagers stated that 'Australian soldiers are very kind, but they often bomb at DONG XOAI [and] make our buffalos and oxen die.'[403] The relocated residents of Long Phuoc were also unimpressed by 1ATF, complaining that 'Australians came here [and] caused people to [go] hungry, buffalos and oxen die, rice fields cannot be ploughed, we may not go out to do business.'[404] Unsurprisingly, villagers who had seen their houses destroyed and were denied access to their land did not have their political opinions swayed by the distribution of a few small commodities. Similar results were found in and around Dat Do after the construction of the fence. Locals there remarked on the courteousness and generosity of Australian troops but remained angered by the way in which the minefield disrupted access to their land.[405]

These reports were an early sign of both the inadequacy of the material aspects of pacification, and, in the case of Hoa Long, the long-term challenge posed by relocated populations. They also showed the way in which the two stated aims of civic action – growing support for the GVN and for 1ATF – could often be at odds. When the Hoa Long villagers complimented Australian soldiers on their discipline it was in comparison to their Vietnamese counterparts:

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[402] See the 'Civic Action' section of the monthly HQAFV reports contained in R723/1/13/1/1 AWM98.
[403] 'Investigation Into Attitude of The People in Hoa Long Village Conducted Early This Year' in 'An Evaluation of Australian Vietnamese Relationships', 25 April 1967; 35 AWM347.
[404] 'Investigation Into Attitude of The People in Hoa Long Village', 25 April 1967; 35 AWM347.
[405] 'Investigation Into Attitude of The People in Hoa Long Village', 25 April 1967; 35 AWM347.

> Male: 44: Australian forces have a better discipline than Vietnamese soldiers. They never steal our chicken, ducks or gather any fruit and flower.
>
> Male: 60: When Australian forces make a raid on us, they rummage everything, but they steal nothing.[406]

This was a small example of the way in which Australian civic action could undermine villager confidence in the GVN by highlighting their comparatively lacklustre performance. It was partly for this reason that Graham reflected after the war that he did not 'put the same emphasis on civic action as a lot of people do', arguing that the program had been 'unduly played up' and that 'there are also a number of pitfalls in civic action – one must not develop expectations that can't be sustained after we leave, even while we're there'.[407] It was an astute observation, but one that would undoubtedly have drawn a wry grin from anyone involved in the construction of Ap Suoi Nghe.

As previously noted, the first eighteen months of US and Australian operations in Phuoc Tuy coincided with a renewed emphasis on pacification policy that culminated in the creation of CORDS in May 1967. The provincial government thus came under renewed pressure from Saigon to undertake a more comprehensive pacification effort just as the conditions emerged to make this possible. As the Dat Do history colourfully states, 'having been resuscitated by the American and Australian military, the gang of puppet authorities in Long Đất began to conduct their pacification plan':

> The Rural Development Cadre, the Regional Forces, the police, and the hamlet and village quislings scoured the hamlets and threatened to discover and destroy our infrastructure and rebuild the strategic hamlets with the title of "new life hamlets". They strongly emphasised psychological warfare, with cultural activities and sports to gather together and seduce the youth, and used propaganda to mislead and sow doubt among the people etc.[408]

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[406] 'Investigation Into Attitude of The People in Hoa Long Village', 25 April 1967; 35 AWM347.
[407] Interview with MAJGEN Graham, 29 March 1971, p. 38; 2 AWM107.
[408] Huong (ed), *The History of the Struggle*, p. 21

Of course, pacification of this kind had been present to some degree in Phuoc Tuy since 1954. Nonetheless here, for the first time, a pacification program was to be implemented that had both ambitious objectives and the resources and support necessary, in theory, to achieve them.

The core of this effort in Phuoc Tuy in 1967 was the Revolutionary Development (RD) cadre. Five teams were in the province, each responsible for creating two *Ap Doi Moi* (Real New Life Hamlets – a theoretically pacified hamlet) in a year. The teams deployed into locations such as Dat Do, Ngai Giao, Lang Phuoc Hai, Binh Gia, Hoa Long and Tam Phuoc.[409] With the exception of Binh Gia, these were hamlets with an entrenched Front presence and history. The teams deployed in and around Dat Do were supported directly by a battalion of the ARVN 18th Division, as well as local RF/PF; although not directly supported by 1ATF, the teams in Hoa Long and Binh Gia could rely on the Australian security presence. A Task Force assessment of the performance of the teams from late 1967 tried to sound an upbeat note, arguing that RD was thought to be effective and that 'the attitude of the local population is considered very favourable to the RD personnel'.[410] Yet in listing Revolutionary Development's actual accomplishments, the Task Force report could point only to a reduction in sniper fire, the introduction of 'very efficient' medical personnel to the hamlets in question, and that cadre were 'a good source for determining local grievances – a sort of close to the ground intelligence agency'.[411] It will be remembered that this was exactly the mission that Revolutionary Development's predecessors had undertaken with great success – generating intelligence by living among the people and winning their trust through civic action. Yet it was a far cry from the ambitious objectives given to the project during its codification and expansion in 1966. By the end of 1967,

[409] COL C.H. Armstrong Jr, 'III Corps R.D. Plan – 1967', 1 December 1966, R569/1/6 AWM103, and HQ 1ATF to HQ AFV, 'Civil Affairs: Revolutionary Development Teams in Phuoc Tuy Province', 8 December 1967; R176/1/36 AWM98.
[410] HQ 1ATF to HQ AFV, 'Civil Affairs: Revolutionary Development Teams in Phuoc Tuy Province', 8 December 1967; R176/1/36 AWM98.
[411] HQ 1ATF to HQ AFV, 'Civil Affairs: Revolutionary Development Teams in Phuoc Tuy Province', 8 December 1967; R176/1/36 AWM98.

there was no sign of a government-sponsored revolution in the hamlets of Phuoc Tuy.

As the Dat Do history states, it was not just the RD program that had responsibility for targeting the infrastructure in Phuoc Tuy. The CIA-sponsored Provincial Reconnaissance Unit (PRU), the National Police Field Force (NPFF) and the Police Special Branch (PSB) all had a direct (and overlapping) role in eliminating infrastructure, while both the regular police and the Territorials were expected to play a role. It was this profusion of competing agencies that lead, at a national level, to a search for an effective coordination mechanism. This emerged in the form of the Intelligence collection and exploitation staff (ICEX) system, a CIA-initiated effort that was quickly adopted by CORDS in May 1967.[412] ICEX called for the establishment of intelligence centres at every level of Vietnamese governance, from district to corps. Here intelligence generated from competing agencies could be collated and acted upon, allowing a detailed picture of the Front to be built up over time and maximising the effectiveness of the resources deployed against the infrastructure.

The first ICEX committee meeting was held in Phuoc Tuy in October 1967, but the program gained little traction in the province's bureaucracy prior to 1968. In the interim, operations against the infrastructure continued as they had previously. Although provincial forces often claimed to have eliminated many members of the infrastructure, advisers were unconvinced of the lasting impact. Captain Jack Leggett, a member of the AATTV who ran the Combined Studies Division (the CIA arm responsible for paramilitary activity within the RVN) operations in the province, argued that many of those picked up in anti-infrastructure operations were low-level personnel whom the Front would find easy to replace.[413] PSA Thomas Austin III agreed, consistently writing that despite monthly pick-ups of between 19 and 20 members of the infrastructure,

[412]Ahern, *Vietnam Declassified,* p. 262.
[413] McNeill, *The Team*, p. 393.

'little permanent damage has been inflicted upon the infrastructure and its capabilities to carry out its mission'.[414]

The other major anti-infrastructure effort was the cordon and searches (C&S) conducted by 1ATF of hamlets throughout the province. In these, Task Force troops would form a cordon in secret around a target village or hamlet. The inhabitants would then be informed that a search was to be conducted, with the Task Force units coordinating with Vietnamese police and intelligence. Any Front members in the village were faced with the choice of trying to hide within the hamlet and risk being arrested or trying to break through the cordon. During Operation BUNDABERG, a cordon and search of Hoa Long, 84 people were detained for no loss to the Australian and South Vietnamese force.[415] The Australians were highly enamoured of C&S operations at first, as they appeared to offer a much greater reward for effort than operations deep in remote jungle areas.[416] This was something of an illusion, however, and after 1968, Task Force C&S operations became rare. The effort required was considerable – to establish an effective cordon of Hoa Long for BUNDABERG took almost the entire Task Force, including not only both infantry battalions but also the SAS Squadron and dismounted cavalry troopers. The reward for this was also less impressive on closer inspection. Prior to BUNDABERG, 1ATF estimated that 185 Front members were living in Hoa Long. Although detaining nearly half would seem a significant blow, in reality of the 84 people detained only eleven could be identified as NLF members and of those just four were cadre of any real significance. The remaining 73 were 'other suspects' and draft dodgers. The note of caution sounded in the AAR that 'it is still possible that the VC infrastructure in Hoa Long has not been destroyed' would prove to be amply justified.[417]

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[414] LTCOL Thomas Austin III, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy – Period Ending 30 November 1967', 30 November 1967, p. 2; Box 2, P98 MR3 OCO Monthly Field Reports, RG472, NARA.
[415] MAJ Richard R. Hannigan, 'Combat After Action Report', 18 November 1966, p. 6; 1/4/18 AWM95.
[416] See for example LTCOL J.A. Warr, 'Cordon and Search Operations in Phuoc Tuy Province', *Australian Army Journal,* no. 222, 1967.
[417] Hannigan, 'Combat After Action Report', 18 November 1966, p. 7; 1/4/18 AWM95.

A more effective effort was the *Chieu Hoi* program. Another Diem legacy, *Chieu Hoi* aimed to convince Front members to rally to the government by using psychological warfare techniques and a variety of inducements, including cash and the promise of resettlement and employment.[418] Although the program was something of an orphan within the South Vietnamese bureaucracy, it survived the fall of Diem and subsequent government instability to become one of the eight priorities enshrined under Project TAKEOFF. Within Phuoc Tuy, advisers felt the program was effective when properly resourced but frequently complained of a shortage of materials, trained personnel, and appropriate psychological warfare support. There were also accusations of mistreatment of ralliers (known as *Hoi Chanh*) by members of the 18th Division.[419] The Dat Do history makes a point of confirming the effectiveness of the Chieu Hoi program, however, complaining that 'The enemy's poisonous psychological warfare practices caused us considerable damage. In the Province, in the first six months of 1966 in Châu Đức District alone there were 22 cases of surrendering to the enemy. From January to October 1966 – in the whole of the Province, 66 cadre and soldiers surrendered – abandoning their duty to return and make their living with their families.'[420]

The Front reacted aggressively to the government reasserting itself in the villages. In July 1967, for example, the Front warned fifteen separate village and hamlet officials in Phuoc Hai, Phuoc Hoa Long and Phuoc Tho that if they did not resign they would be assassinated. Two days after the last warning, six Front guerrillas dressed as ARVN soldiers killed the secretary of the Phuoc Hoa Long village council, Nguyen Van Ky. Another councillor was abducted but later released.[421] This was a continuation of the policy that had existed in the south since the *Tru Gian* campaign of the late 1950s, in which officials were killed in order to intimidate others and isolate the government from the rural populace. The Dat Do history states:

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[418] Hunt, *Pacification* p. 24.
[419] Hunt, *Pacification*, p. 101.
[420] Footnote in Huong (ed), *The History of the Struggle*, p. 18.
[421] CORDS to 1ATF, 'Combined Weekly Attitude Report', 27 July 1967; R569/1/6 AWM103.

> The Province Security Committee actively expanded its information collection activities, discovered an organisation of traitors, and made a list of a number of dangerous opponents. Files were created on recalcitrant and wicked thugs, and arrangements made for our armed reconnaissance elements to enter the hamlets, kill the thugs, eliminate the criminals, and take the movement into the towns and suburbs. The Long Đất District armed reconnaissance force entered the strategic hamlets many times and killed 10 wicked thugs, shot and wounded another, and captured three.[422]

The parallels to the government's own nascent anti-infrastructure programs are obvious. In November two civilians were stabbed to death and notes left on their bodies stating that this was the penalty for informers; near midnight on 19 December another informer was bound with cord, shot and stabbed in the head, and then dumped outside the Long Dien district compound.[423] The intent of such visceral propaganda was clear.

The Front also used more direct methods to combat action against its own ranks. In the last two weeks of November, it launched a series of attacks throughout Long Le and Long Dien.[424] One, mounted by a company-sized group on 28 November, targeted the district compound, police station, Vietnamese Information Service (VIS) office and power generator. The police station was seriously damaged by rocket fire and thirteen Vietnamese personnel were wounded.[425] Attacks such as this served numerous purposes. Their violence intimidated the government presence within villages, convincing police, soldiers and officials to remain in their compounds and not out among the villagers. They also served as a form of propaganda, demonstrating to the population that the Front remained a powerful and viable force. While its military power had been reduced since the arrival of Free World military forces at the start of 1966, the Front was still able to mount attacks such as these into the province's populated areas; and to the average villager, attached to the outside world primarily by word of mouth and intermittent printed media, the

[422] Huong (ed), *The History of the Struggle*, pp. 21–22.
[423] CAPT C. Rule, 'AATTV Monthly Report – Capt C. Rule BARIA – Long Dien District', 23 December 1967; R723/10/13 AWM293.
[424] LTCOL Thomas Austin III, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy – Period Ending 30 November 1967', 30 November 1967, p. 2; Box 2, P98 MR3 OCO Monthly Field Reports, RG472, NARA.
[425] CAPT C. Rule, 'Phuoc Tuy Senior Advisors Monthly Report – Nov', 2 December 1967; R723/10/13 AWM293.

drop in the Front's power province-wide may not have been readily apparent in the wake of one of these assaults.

These attacks also demonstrated the continued weakness of the province Regional and Popular Forces. As we have already seen, the performance of RF/PF units on the defensive at Lang Phuoc Hai and Lo Gom in early 1967 gave Brigadier Graham an upbeat view of the capabilities of the Territorials. Although Graham later stated that he considered it 'axiomatic' that the upgrading of the local forces should be a priority, in practice he rejected a training mission as being beyond the capabilities of an already stretched 1ATF and an unsuitable use of the AATTV. Support would be limited to logistics, fire support and the growing American advisory presence.[426] The Territorials undoubtedly benefited from this, but there seems little doubt Graham overestimated their capability at the time. Captain George Mansford was one of a handful of advisers attached to a local unit, in this case 614 RF Company in Binh Ba. He found them a 'semi-trained rabble' with just 40 of a rostered 120 men available.[427] Although the soldiers of 614 would improve under Mansfield's tutelage, their situation was far from unique – under-strength, badly undertrained, and at the end of a failing logistical chain.

The state of the Regional Forces was also demonstrated by the experience of Captain Clarence Rule, who served as the District Senior Adviser in Long Dien until March 1968. On 9 December 1967, Rule flew to Long Son Island to replace a US adviser who had been supervising an operation by the 612th Regional Forces company and had been wounded by a booby trap. Rule was scathing of the company's subsequent performance. The executive officer of the company (who had commanded the popular force platoon at Lo Gom) had to be cajoled by Rule into disposing of other booby traps, and the soldiers involved neatly demonstrated the inadequacy of their training by strapping on their mine detection gear backwards. Over the course of the evening the company called in lavish fire support that hit 'a few acres of empty paddy field'

[426] Interview with MAJGEN Graham, 29 March 1971, p. 15; 2 AWM107.
[427] McNeill, *The Team*, p. 235.

and then used its own organic small arms and mortars to 'shoot the moon into a sorry state'.[428] The next morning the company commander got lost in the tangle of mangrove swamps ringing the island, and it was only through luck that they made the planned rendezvous with the landing craft.[429]

The final series of events relevant to pacification in Phuoc Tuy that occurred in 1967 were the Presidential and Lower House elections, held in September and October respectively. It will be remembered that many within the US had long seen the implementation of democratic government in South Vietnam as key to the long-term survival of the Republic of Vietnam. Many Americans retained an obvious faith in the merits of democratic government and believed it to be the natural conclusion of the modernisation process.[430] They also recognised that the maintenance of a military dictatorship within Vietnam undercut the claims from both the American and Vietnamese governments that the ongoing war was a contest between freedom on one side and authoritarian Communism on the other. The election of a democratic government would give the Republic domestic and international legitimacy. In a more practical sense, it was also believed that elections could greatly assist the pacification process. In theory, elected officials would need to be responsive to the wishes of their constituents, creating an incentive for reform to take place. This in turn would give the rural population a reason to commit themselves to the Republic, decisively ending the ideological contest between the government and the Front.[431] It was for this reason that Robert Komer told President Johnson in January 1967 that '[a]side from continued military success, the biggest single thing going for us in 1967 can be [the] *emergence of a popularly based GVN*.'[432]

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[428] Rule, 'AATTV Monthly Report – Long Dien District', 23 December 1967; R723/10/13 AWM293.
[429] Rule, 'AATTV Monthly Report – Long Dien District', 23 December 1967; R723/10/13 AWM293.
[430] Latham, *Modernization as Ideology,* pp. 32–36.
[431] The discussion of this argument about the Strategic Hamlet Program in Latham, *Modernization as Ideology,* p. 186 and around the 1970–71 elections in Hunt, *Pacification,* p. 265, shows the continuity of (American) thought about democracy's role in pacification.
[432] Robert Komer, "Memorandum for the President," Jan. 11, 1967, vol. 63, box 39, Vietnam Country File (CF), National Security File (NSF), Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, quoted in James

Unfortunately, the elections of 1967 did not live up to this promise. Running on a unity ticket designed to prevent a split of the military, General Nguyen Van Thieu (as President) and Air Vice-Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky (as Vice-President) won a plurality of 34.8% of the vote. While voting was conducted fairly on election day, much of the campaign itself was not. The ruling junta banned certain candidates from entering the race, and it became clear from information leaked during the campaign that regardless of the result the generals had no intention of giving up power.[433] The widespread reporting of these campaign irregularities meant that the election did little to quiet criticism of the South Vietnamese government within the US or increase international perceptions of the legitimacy of the Republic.[434] As James McAllister has noted, the perceived fixing of the election has meant that many historians of the Vietnam War have treated it 'as a non-event' because 'the South Vietnamese military regime understandably perpetuated itself in power'.[435] This is regrettable, for the election did demonstrate both the willingness of the Vietnamese electorate to turn out and vote and its ability to make independent choices on the basis of policy and personality.[436] Nonetheless, the circumstances of the campaign ensured that the election did not build the levels of domestic and international legitimacy that the Johnson Administration had hoped.

The conduct of the 1967 elections also hinted at the problems with using democracy as a tool for pacification. In Phuoc Tuy, the turnout of over 90 percent of registered voters (against a national average of 83 percent) in defiance of Front threats of violence and anti-election propaganda was

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McAllister, '"A Fiasco of Noble Proportions": The Johnson Administration and the South Vietnamese Elections of 1967', *Pacific Historical Review,* Vol. 73, No. 4, p. 619.

[433] McAllister, '"A Fiasco of Noble Proportions"', p. 648.

[434] For a near contemporary view of this, see Frances Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam,* Vintage Books, New York, 1973 (1972), pp. 449–450.

[435] McAllister, '"A Fiasco of Noble Proportions"', p. 650.

[436] Theresa Tull, 'Broadening the Base: South Vietnamese Elections, 1967–71', pp. 37–38 and Donald Kirk, 'Presidential Campaign Politics: The Uncontested 1971 Election', pp. 60–61, both in John C. Donnell and Charles A. Joiner (eds), *Electoral Politics in South Vietnam,* Lexington Books, Lexington, 1974.

encouraging.[437] Yet many political scientists questioned if high voter turnout such as this showed genuine engagement with the political process or reflected a belief among voters that they were obliged to vote.[438] Province Senior Adviser Austin endorsed both views in the lead up to the elections, stating in his July report that 'most of the rural population continues to regard voting as a duty to the authorities' before characterising the same population a month later as being engaged with the electoral process and discussing the respective merits of individual candidates.[439] Whatever the case, the elections did not produce a government that was more responsive to the needs of the people of Phuoc Tuy. The man elected to the Lower House in October, Major Trinh Anh Linh, was a Northern Catholic who did not live in the province and rarely visited.[440] Perhaps more importantly, Linh served on a body that lacked the power to undertake serious reform – as is discussed in Chapter Eight, real power continued to lie in the office of President Thieu.

By the start of 1968, advisers were optimistic about the progress made by pacification in Phuoc Tuy over the previous two years.[441] The balance of power in the province had shifted away from the Front over the course of 1966 and 1967 thanks to the intervention first of US units and then the arrival of 1ATF. Unable to defend their overt holdings against US and Australian firepower and mobility, the NLF had been forced to return to a more covert position – akin to the one they held prior to 1964. For the government, US and Australian intervention had allowed the reclamation of the population that had fallen under Front control and the beginning of a more aggressive pacification campaign. The action of 1ATF under first Jackson and then Graham looked to consolidate these changes. Guided by institutional experience and doctrine, the

[437] Tull, 'Broadening the Base',p. 38.
[438] John C. Donnell, 'Prospects for Political Cohesion and Electoral Competition', in John C. Donnell and Charles A. Joiner (eds), *Electoral Politics in South Vietnam,* Lexington Books, Lexington, 1974, p. 151.
[439] LTCOL Thomas Austin III, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy – Period Ending 31 August 1967 [actually July 1967]', undated, p. 1; and LTCOL Thomas Austin III, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy – Period Ending 31 August 1967', 31 August 1967, p. 1; both in Box 2, P98 MR3 OCO Monthly Field Reports, RG472, NARA.
[440] 'Influence of the Senators and Deputies in Phuoc Tuy', 21 October 1970, p. 3; Local Civil Affairs 1970 1, Box 1578, A1 731, RG472, NARA.
[441] William F. Mulcahy, 'Comments of the Deputy Province Senior Adviser', 17 February 1968; Province Reports 1968, Box 1575, A1 731, RG472, NARA.

Task Force worked assiduously to isolate the Front from the population and further extend government control. Yet some of the measures undertaken to achieve these goals, such as the laying of the Dat Do minefield or the creation of destruction of Long Phuoc, would have ramifications far in excess of what was initially anticipated. In this way, 1966-67 'prepared the battlefield' for the rest of the remaining five years of pacification.

However behind the optimism of Australian commanders and US advisers, serious problems remained. While the government was able to deploy more resources to pacification in a more sustained manner than in previous periods, the program itself was far from well run or effective. In part this was about maturity – miracles could not be expected overnight. Yet it was also in part structural, a reflection of failings in the conception of pacification as a whole. For all the rhetoric of 'revolution' that dominated discussions of pacification policy, the Vietnamese government did not move seriously against major sources of villager grievance such as land tenure or corruption, instead relying on the minor civic action of Revolutionary Development cadre. While these teams performed competently in Phuoc Tuy, they did not come anywhere close to fulfilling the exaggerated expectations bestowed upon them and would not do so unless empowered to enact legitimate change within the province's political and social structure.

The failure of Revolutionary Development in Phuoc Tuy also pointed to the limitations in 1ATF's involvement in pacification. It was simply outside the power of the Task Force to make the changes necessary to win the allegiance of the population – a point generally understood by Australian commanders. Villagers appreciated the aid provided through civic action and in some cases more significant changes, such as increased security in villages like Xuyen Moc. But this was not enough to seriously shift their political allegiances, and in many cases not even enough to compensate for the dislocation caused by military activity. In extreme cases such as Long Phuoc, this meant the destruction of homes and isolation from land that had both economic and familial significance. Nonetheless these problems were not immediately

obvious to Australian and Vietnamese leadership, and American advisers, in Phuoc Tuy. It would take the ructions of the Tet Offensive for a reassessment of pacification to take place.

Chapter 6. Tet 1968

January–October 1968

At the start of 1968, the prospects for the coming year in Phuoc Tuy seemed bright. Writing in the January monthly report, the Deputy Province Senior Adviser (DPSA) declared that the: 'Pacification Programme should be in high gear within two weeks. All RD Cadre Teams are at full strength … it is felt that first semester projects will be completed on schedule, or slightly ahead of schedule.' [442] While District Advisers were more circumspect, pointing to continuing questions over supplies and the provision of security to Revolutionary Development teams, the tone remained optimistic. Only the Province Senior Adviser's report sounded a note of caution: 'The last three days of the month were filled with intelligence reports of a TET Offensive by the VC.' To this point, however, he added, the province had not been attacked or received any more harassment than usual.[443] Hours after this report was filed, NLF forces executed a series of attacks in Phuoc Tuy as part of the nationwide offensive. Attacks by fire on Vietnamese and US outposts across the province complemented the occupation of Baria by D445 Battalion. Over subsequent days, major attacks were also mounted on government positions in Long Dien and Dat Do, while wholesale harassment and assassination operations were carried out. By the time fighting subsided on 9 February, hundreds of homes had been destroyed or damaged and over a thousand Phuoc Tuy residents had become refugees.[444]

The Tet Offensive, as it became known, is often portrayed as the turning point of the war – the moment at which, despite the failure of the offensive to achieve its objectives, at very heavy cost to the PLAF and PAVN, the US public

[442] William F. Mulcahy, 'Comments of the Deputy Province Senior Adviser', 17 Feb 1968, p. 1; Province Reports 1968 (2), Box 1575, A1 731, RG 472, NARA.
[443] LTCOL Thomas Austin III, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy Province – Period Ending 31 January 1968', 31 Jan 1968, p. 2; Province Reports 1968 (2), Box 1575, A1 731, RG 472, NARA.
[444] LTCOL Thomas Austin III, 'Refugee Recovery Program', 22 Feb 1968, Miscellaneous, Box 1575, A1 731, RG 472, NARA.

lost the will to continue the struggle.[445] However, the experience of the offensive in Phuoc Tuy does not conform to the conventional narrative. The offensive in Phuoc Tuy failed to inspire a popular uprising, as the Front had hoped, but did succeed in paralysing the pacification program in the province. Government forces proved unable to prevent the Front from entering populated areas during the offensive and unwilling to contest their continued access in the aftermath, failures that helped alienate the population. Thus while the Tet Offensive was undoubtedly a defeat for the Front in Phuoc Tuy, it was a deeply ambiguous victory for the RVN – one that demonstrated their continued dependence on external forces and the frailty of their position.

This chapter examines the eight months that followed the Tet Offensive. It was a period marked by 1ATF operations which aimed to negate the Front bases in the Long Hai hills, and a smaller Front offensive in August that once again succeeded in penetrating and briefly holding the major villages of Long Dien and Dat Do. The failure of government forces again to prevent these Front penetrations contributed to a growing sense of unease among advisers as to the future of pacification in Phuoc Tuy. Although acknowledging there had been shortfalls in logistics and training, they increasingly came to believe that South Vietnamese forces in the province should have been more effective than they were, given the resources available to them. That they were not reflected the presence of incompetent or corrupt officials and officers within the province hierarchy. For the first time, then, over the course of 1968 advisers began to grapple with one of the central problems that came to define pacification in Phuoc Tuy: how to produce a cadre of leaders who could make proper use of the resources at their disposal.

Despite the continued heavy losses taken by PLAF and PAVN units in 1966 and early 1967, the 'Southern' faction in the VWP did not lose faith in the ability of Communist units to force a military decision. General Secretary Le Duan, in particular, continued to believe that the 'talk' in the Party's 'talk-fight'

[445] See for example James H. Willbanks 'Reconsidering the 1968 Tet Offensive', *Australian Army Journal,* Vol V, No 1, pp. 7–18.

strategy (outlined in Chapter 1) could only occur after a decisive victory on the battlefield, and that this victory was to be achieved through a general offensive or general uprising. In February 1965 he had written to General Nguyen Chi Thanh, the commander of COSVN, arguing that 'a general insurrection in coordination with a general military offensive … will shatter the morale of the puppet army'.[446] Despite the Party's Resolution 13 being ostensibly about talk-fight it nonetheless contained a call for a 'spontaneous uprising in order to win a decisive victory in the shortest possible time', and it was this line that Le Duan continued to push throughout the first half of 1967.[447]

Le Duan got his chance during the planning for the 1967–68 winter-spring campaign in mid-1967. The PAVN General Staff's initial treatment for the winter-spring campaign was a continuation of previous years – calling for the destruction of three to five US brigades, six to seven ARVN divisions and the 'liberation' of 5 to 8 million Southerners and the cities of Dong Ha and Quang Tri. Within the army, however, there was a growing realisation that these objectives were unrealistic. Chief of the General Staff, General Van Tien Dung, revealed in a postwar interview:

> The plan was submitted to the Politburo and the Central Military Party Committee, but the more we thought about it, the more uncomfortable we became. The plan was like our plan for the previous winter-spring campaign, the only difference being that the target goals were higher. The targets and the tactics, the fighting methods, were the same as those we had laid out for the previous year, but the realities of the battlefield decreed that we could not attain these goals.[448]

Nguyen Chi Thanh did not explicitly address these concerns, but asked for more thought to be given to the problem. Thanh's sudden death in July from a heart attack, however, allowed Dung to make his concerns clear to Le Duan at a meeting between the two several days later. In response to Dung's concerns, Le Duan suggested that rather than continuing trying to win significant victories

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[446] Le Duan, *Thu Vao Nam* [Letters to the South], Su That, Ha Noi, 1986, p. 88 quoted in Pribbenow II, 'General Vo Nguyen Giap…', p. 4.
[447] Nguyen, *Hanoi's War,* p. 90.
[448] General Van Tien Dung, cited in 'Tao mot buoc ngoat trong khang chien chong My', quoted in Pribbenow, 'General Vo Nguyen Giap…' pp. 12–13.

over US and ARVN units as a precursor to the general offensive-general uprising, the winter-spring offensive should in fact *be* the uprising. It was from this initial suggestion that the Tet Offensive was born.[449]

Le Duan and Dung presented their plan to the Politburo on July 18–19, where they met considerable opposition from 'Northerners' such as Ho Chi Minh and General Vo Nguyen Giap. While these objections were primarily concerned with what the 'Northerners' considered to be the unrealistic expectations of the Duan/Dung plan, their objections must also be placed, as Lien-Hang T. Nguyen and Merle Pribbenow have argued, in the context of both internal VWP politics and the DRV's effort to chart the dangerous waters of the Sino-Soviet split.[450] By 1967 the 'Southern' faction had solidified its ascendency within the Party; allying with Le Duan and his cohorts must have been an attractive proposition for ambitious men like Van Tien Dung looking to usurp older members of the Party leadership like Giap. This was seemingly confirmed by the 'Revisionist Anti-Party Affair' of mid-1967, which saw over 200 high-ranking Party members purged – including Giap allies such as Deputy Defence Minister Dang Kim Giang and Deputy Chief of the General Staff Lieutenant-General Nguyen Van Vinh.[451] Moreover, this purge was also a way of sending placating signals to the People's Republic of China (PRC). The Chinese had been dismayed by the adoption of talk-fight, believing its emphasis on negotiations signalled a move by the DRV into the Soviet sphere – for Moscow continued to strongly advocate a negotiated end to the war. The purge of senior officials, many of who were perceived to be overtly pro-Soviet, helped placate the PRC and allow the DRV to continue to draw considerable aid from both nations.[452]

Despite the purge of his opponents, Le Duan only secured support for the general offensive-general uprising in January, and the final date for the offensive – 30–31 January – was not decided until 15 January. This delay caused

[449] Pribbenow, 'General Vo Nguyen Giap…', p. 15.
[450] Covered in depth in Pribbenow, 'General Vo Nguyen Giap…', pp. 20-24 and Nguyen, *Hanoi's War,* pp. 87-109. For the older view that both Pribbenow and Nguyen challenge see William J. Duiker, *The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam,* Westview Press, Boulder, 1981, pp. 263–265.
[451] Nguyen, *Hanoi's War,* pp. 91-92.
[452] Nguyen, *Hanoi's War,* p. 97.

immense difficulty across the south, as Communist headquarters scrambled to disseminate orders to subordinate units in time. Ba Bien province headquarters only received its final briefing by a COSVN representative on 26-27 January, and in the event was unable to pass critical information to subordinate units before the offensive began. In some parts of Vietnam a misunderstanding over dates – the Lunar New Year ended a day earlier in the south – meant some units attacked a day early, giving some indication of what was to come. Nonetheless, when the main offensive was launched on the evening of the 30 January, it still came as a shock to the US, South Vietnam and their allies.[453]

The extent to which Tet represented an intelligence failure on the part of the US and RVN has been extensively discussed elsewhere and does not need to be repeated in detail here.[454] While many within MACV and the US and Vietnamese governments expected some kind of offensive over Tet, few predicted the scale. In part this was because, as in 1966, US analysis of events in Vietnam in many ways conformed to that of the Communists. Like the PAVN General Staff, US intelligence agencies recognised that the events of 1965–67 demonstrated the failure of Communist strategy on the battlefield. Yet perhaps understandably, US analysts overlooked the willingness of senior VWP and PAVN leadership to gamble on an even more radical strategy. Instead, reports such as the November 1967 Special National Intelligence Estimate argued that 'they aim for a protracted war', one which would gradually wear down US and Free World units, destroy the pacification program and emphasise building political support in the villages.[455]This was, somewhat ironically, the strategy advocated by the 'Northerners' and one that would be eventually adopted after the disasters of 1968. But the failure to anticipate that Hanoi would not take the 'logical' choice represented one of the two reasons why Tet came as such a

[453] Pribbenow, 'General Vo Nguyen Giap…', p. 19; Huong (ed), *The History of the Struggle,* p. 29.
[454] See for example Ahern, *CIA and the Generals,* pp. 71–73; Bruce Palmer, Jr, 'US Intelligence and Vietnam', *Studies in Intelligence,* Vol. 28, (Special Issue), 1984, pp. 49–59; Graham A. Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal,* CMH, Washington D.C., 2006, pp. 56–57; James J. Wirtz, *The Tet Offensive: Intelligence Failure in War,* Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1992.
[455] Special National Intelligence Estimate 14.3-67, 'Capabilities of the Vietnamese Communists for Fighting in South Vietnam', 13 November 1967, *FRUS 1964–1968,* 5: p. 1025.

surprise – the other being the inability of US intelligence to adequately filter the enormous mass of information being fed to it.[456]

This is not to say that an offensive of some kind was completely unanticipated. On 10 January General Weyand, CG IIFFV, told Westmoreland that he believed an enemy offensive aimed at Saigon and key surrounding targets was imminent. Weyand requested that he be allowed to redeploy units under his command into a defensive shield around the capital and key logistical areas such as Bien Hoa and Long Binh. Westmoreland assented. Hearing this, COMAFV, Major-General Vincent, offered 1ATF to Weyand. Signals intelligence had seemingly justified Weyand's concern, for around the time of his meeting with Westmoreland, Front radio traffic across III CTZ had ceased. Weyand eagerly accepted Vincent's offer, but the redeployment was delayed after Canberra objected. Eventually General Wilton – presumably under some political pressure – assented to the move, as long as one of 1ATF's three battalions stayed in Phuoc Tuy to defend Nui Dat. Codenamed Operation COBURG, the deployment began on the 24 January with 2RAR/NZ (ANZAC), 7RAR and supporting elements moving to an American fire support base to the north of Long Binh. Although highly successful in helping to break up large-scale attacks on Long Binh and Bien Hoa, COBURG ensured that the majority of 1ATF was outside the province when the offensive began in Phuoc Tuy.[457]

With the PLAF 5th Division assigned to the attack on Bien Hoa, the responsibility for the offensive in Phuoc Tuy fell to D445 Battalion, the district companies, and local guerrillas. As was the case elsewhere, their attacks were designed to paralyse the government within the province. The bulk of D445 was to infiltrate into Baria and attack targets such as the police compound, the civil administrative headquarters and the province chief's house. While this was occurring, one company was to attack the National Training Centre in Van Kiep while another mounted an attack against the US 1/83d artillery, located in the

[456] Daddis, *No Sure Victory,* pp. 137–138.
[457] McNeill and Ekins, *On the Offensive*, pp. 289–290.

Heavyweight base just to the north of Hoa Long.[458] In the main villages of the province – Long Dien, Dat Do and Hoa Long – district units and local guerrillas were to mount attacks by fire against government posts, and to 'mobilise' the people.[459] As was the case elsewhere in the country, the hope was that such operations would lead to a general uprising that would in turn end the war. *D445* records the excitement felt within the battalion on the eve of the offensive: 'Everyone was extremely elated … The prospect of returning to their home villages and meeting once again with their families – which was only a few days away, ran repeatedly through the hearts of everyone.'[460]

In the event, communication delays meant the offensive was not launched in Phuoc Tuy until the morning of 1 February – two days after the earliest attacks in the north and a day after the main attack in Saigon.[461] Despite this, D445 was able to move undetected into Baria in the early hours of the morning. The initial attack, launched at 0500, overran the administration and logistics (A&L) compound on the outskirts of the city before moving on to the buildings housing various government agencies and the homes of US advisers. At roughly the same time the US 'Heavyweight' artillery base reported mortar and rocket fire on its position, while Van Kiep was also attacked. At 0730 1ATF received a request for help from sector headquarters and dispatched A Company, 3RAR, mounted in Armoured Personnel Carriers (APC), to assist. The Australians arrived just over an hour later, shortly after a South Vietnamese relief force was dispatched from Long Dien.[462]

The arrival of the two relief forces appears to have seriously disrupted the cohesion of D445. The Australian force, after arriving at sector headquarters, broke up into platoon groups and began securing various key locations and evacuating the wounded. This caused the battle to dissolve into scattered firefights as these platoons clashed with small parties of Viet Cong

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[458] Chamberlain, *The Viet Cong D445 Battalion,* pp. 57–58.
[459] Huong (ed), *The History of the Struggle*, p. 30.
[460] Chamberlain, *The Viet Cong D445 Battalion,* pp. 56–57.
[461] Chamberlain, *The Viet Cong D445 Battalion,* p. 57.
[462] '1 Australian Task Force Intsum Number 33-68, Period covered from 020001H to 022400H February 68'; 1/4/85 AWM95.

around the town. One such fight occurred at the A&L compound, where an Australian platoon joined the Long Dien force in trying to eject entrenched D445. The acerbic Australian DSA, Captain Clarence Rule, observed that:

> L/Dien ADVISERS used M72 rockets and .50cal MG to kill/wound these VC. A Pl of 3RAR assisted – a SGT killed 1 VC escaping across the field. Approx 10 VC KIA. The Viets took cover behind walls etc and when op was completed, emerged like bad smells and collected the AKs etc – giving us none. However, the Aust Pl stole 3 SMG's (Thompsons) + 6-7 M1 carbines, with our assistance, so the day wasn't entirely lost.[463]

Despite the poor performance of South Vietnamese units, by mid-afternoon D445's attack had clearly failed. The battalion began to withdraw, although sniper fire continued within Baria for the next two days.[464]

The end of the attack in Baria, however, did not mark the end of the Tet Offensive in Phuoc Tuy. Rather, it ushered in a week of further fighting across the province. Incidents included more attacks by fire against government outposts, the assassination of the hamlet and deputy hamlet chiefs in Ap Suoi Nghe, an attack against the RD team in An Nhut, the destruction of culverts throughout the province, and a brief occupation of Dat Do. The most serious activity occurred in Long Dien, where an attack by C25 Long Dien District Company on the 3 February destroyed the police station, Vietnamese Information Service office and town electricity generator. Rule recorded being isolated within the district compound for over a week and trading sniper fire with the encircling NLF. An effort to drive the enemy force off by the 3/52d ARVN Regiment and 52d Ranger Battalion resulted in disaster. Encountering heavy small arms fire short of its start line the 3/52d disintegrated, with its battalion commander and US adviser killed by a machete-wielding Communist soldier.[465] After this encounter, however, Front forces withdrew, bringing the Tet Offensive to an end within Phuoc Tuy.

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[463] CAPT. Clarence Rule, 'Monthly Report – AATTV – Phuoc Tuy – Jan 68', 19 Feb 68; R723/10/13, AWM293.
[464] Chamberlain, *The Viet Cong D445 Battalion,* p. 58.
[465] McNeill and Ekins, *On the Offensive*, p. 310; CAPT. Clarence Rule, 'AATTV Monthly Report – Baria – Rule', 8 March 1968; R723/10/13 AWM293.

Approximately 32,000 members of the NLF, PLAF and PAVN were killed in the Tet Offensive across South Vietnam.[466] Yet it failed to achieve its major objectives. Both the government and the army of the Republic of Vietnam continued to function in the wake of the offensive. The nature of popular participation in the offensive is too varied for satisfactory generalisations, but ultimately there was no general uprising. Although they would not admit it publicly, Communist leadership right up to Le Duan and the Central Committee quickly realised the offensive had failed.[467] This realisation was shared by American leadership within Vietnam. Within the CIA's Saigon station there was 'elation' when it became clear the South Vietnamese government had survived the offensive.[468] While acknowledging the damage done by the sheer scale of the offensive, and emphasising the possibility of further attacks, Westmoreland argued in the weeks following the attacks that Tet represented a great opportunity. Along the way the Front had exposed itself *en masse* to Free World firepower and had taken extremely heavy losses as a result. Komer summarised the optimism that emerged within MACV: 'If the GVN can recover quickly enough from the near pre-Tet disaster, and we can go on the counter-offensive in other areas while containing the NVA up north, we may well force Hanoi to the negotiating table or otherwise materially shorten the war.'[469]

Despite their failure to achieve their objectives and the heavy losses they had suffered, Tet came to be viewed as a great strategic victory for the Communists. In the words of historian Graham A. Cosmas, '[m]ilitary failure paradoxically produced political success', as US voters and politicians increasingly questioned the prospects of future success.[470] The offensive shook the resolve of many within the Johnson White House, not least the President himself. A disastrous attempt by the Joint Chiefs of Staff to manipulate Johnson into beginning a national mobilisation reinforced the growing doubts within the

[466] Ahern, *Vietnam Declassified*, p. 285.
[467] Nguyen, *Hanoi's War*, p. 111.
[468] Ahern, *Vietnam Declassified,* p. 285.
[469] Memo, Komer to Westmoreland, 12 Feb 68, quoted in Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal,* p. 65.
[470] Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal,* pp. 59-61.

Administration. The JCS prodded Westmoreland into requesting additional troops for potential offensive operations into Laos and then presented the case to Johnson as one that could only be accomplished through mobilisation. Johnson sent the troops but demurred on the mobilisation, instead commissioning incoming Secretary of Defence Clark Clifford to review the Administration's overall Vietnam policy.[471]

Clifford symbolised the changes within the Johnson Administration over the Tet period. He had entered the Administration as a 'hawk', but over the course of his month-long review became convinced that the US needed to disengage from Vietnam, in no small part thanks to the JCS' bungled efforts at political manipulation. The troop request was also leaked and published in the *New York Times* on 10 March, creating the same perceptions of unsolvable stalemate in the public arena that it had within the Administration.[472] This furore coincided with the emergence of two credible challengers to Johnson for the Democratic nomination in the 1968 Presidential election in Senator Eugene McCarthy and Senator Robert F. Kennedy. Exhausted by Vietnam, seemingly deserted by his own party, and with his closest advisers urging disengagement, Johnson announced in a televised address to the nation on 31 March both a unilateral halt to the bombing of North Vietnam and that he would not seek to recontest the Presidency. He died just five years later, aged 64.

The perception of the Tet Offensive as a victory transformed into a defeat by political forces lies at the heart of much of a long and continuing tradition of anguish within American historiography of the war.[473] Yet when viewed through the lens of the pacification program – and the war as a contest not between the US and the DRV but the VWP and the RVN – the results and

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[471] Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal,* p. 97.
[472] George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975,* McGraw-Hill, New York, 1986, p. 219.
[473] For many American commentators the Tet Offensive is the glaring example of a broader trend during the Vietnam War, where a biased left-wing media and antiwar movement deliberately obscured the truth of American victory on the battlefield for their own political ends. See Jeffrey P. Kimball, 'The Stab-in-the-Back Legend and the Vietnam War', *Armed Forces & Society*, Vol. 14 No. 3, pp. 433–458, for an overview. A particularly egregious example of the genre is Mark W. Woodruff, *Unheralded Victory: Who Won the Vietnam War?,* HarperCollins, Hammersmith, 2000.

conclusions of Tet are less clear-cut. Certainly, in Phuoc Tuy, there could be little doubt the Front had been defeated in both a military and political sense. This failure was a bitter pill to swallow for cadre and soldier who had already spent years of hardship in isolated jungle base areas. *D445* records that in the wake of the offensive 'a negative tendency arose in the resolve of the unit', and the battalion leadership was forced to crack down on 'the atmosphere of silence, vague thoughts and foolish optimism'.[474] So too, the cavalier treatment of civilian life, property and the sacred Tet holiday by the Front generated anger and resentment among the population, in Baria in particular. In this village, 45 civilians were killed, and 77 were wounded during the offensive. Some 144 houses were destroyed and another 258 damaged in Baria and Long Dien. Events such as the mining of a schoolyard in Dat Do that resulted in the deaths of five children further inflamed public opinion against the Front.[475]

Crucially, however, this anger at the Front did not translate into support for the government, and in many ways Tet was just as large a catastrophe for RVN in Phuoc Tuy. In the days following the fighting in Baria, police failed to stop widespread looting by both civilians and ARVN troops. This performance was once again contrasted with that of Australian troops, who, PSA Austin wrote, 'earned the admiration of everyone' for their conduct in Baria.[476] In Long Dien, 'great numbers of the village overtly or covertly helped the Viet Cong', which Austin concluded was the result of 'the cowardice and looting by Government troops in the village and the poor face to face government information program.'[477] It is hard to accept this as a full explanation, as Long Dien had long been a significant bastion of support for the Front; and the reference to a failed information program implies the government had a positive message to sell, itself a very dubious proposition. But the poor

[474] Chamberlain, *The Viet Cong D445 Battalion,* p. 59.
[475] William F. Mulcahy, 'Interim Situation Report and Partial Recap of Recent Actions', 22 Feb 1968, p. 2; Miscellaneous, Box 1575, A1 731, RG 472, NARA; LTCOL Thomas Austin III, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy Province – Period Ending: 29 February 1968', 29 Feb 1968, p. 9; Province Reports 1968 (2), Box 1575, A1 731, RG 472, NARA.
[476] Austin, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy Province', 29 Feb 1968, p. 1; Province Reports 1968 (2), Box 1575, A1 731, RG 0472.
[477] Austin, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy Province', 29 Feb 1968, p. 1; Province Reports 1968 (2), Box 1575, A1 731, RG 0472.

discipline of ARVN troops and the heavy use of air and artillery strikes on suspected Front positions within Long Dien town did little except reinforce existing perceptions of the government within the population. The group resignation of Long Dien village officials shortly after the offensive in protest at not having been paid in six months only exacerbated this problem, as the government's best connection with the villagers – many of whom were living in a makeshift refugee camp outside the town – was lost.[478]

The damage done to pacification was highlighted by a document captured by 7RAR in late November 1967 and handed to DPSA, William F. Mulcahy, in late March. The document claimed to detail the winter-spring plan for Chau Duc District but had been given a low credibility rating by intelligence analysts. Given the date of its production relative to the dissemination of instructions by COSVN for the general offensive, it is possible it was already outdated when captured. Nonetheless, as Mulcahy pointed out in his March report, many of the major objectives within the plan had been achieved. These included the elimination of the NPFF company and government leadership in Hoa Long, the destruction of overt GVN identification in hamlets, the elimination of the Revolutionary Development cadre and the encouragement of villagers in Long Dien to leave their homes.[479] Even while the Front had failed to achieve the objectives of the 'General Offensive-General Uprising', it had still inflicted serious damage on pacification in Phuoc Tuy.

But the biggest consequence of Tet was the fear and paralysis it induced in the RVN. Nationwide, the government's response to Tet was to withdraw the forces committed to rural security – RF/PF, NPFF, RDC – from the villages and into defensive positions around the major towns that had been attacked. Even where units were not withdrawn, a defensive mentality dominated. As Thomas Ahern argued, 'this retreat unto a defensive crouch, just as the VCI had taken

[478] Austin, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy Province', 29 Feb 1968, p. 1; Province Reports 1968 (2), Box 1575, A1 731, RG 0472; Richard W. Des Reis, 'Non-Payment of Hamlet Officials, Long Dien Village', 30 April 1968, pp. 1–2; Miscellaneous, Box 1575, A1 731, RG 0472, NARA.
[479] William F. Mulcahy, 'Comments of the Deputy Province Senior Adviser', 29 March 1968, pp. 2–3; Province Reports 1968 (2), Box 1575, A1 731, RG 0472, NARA.

potentially crippling losses, produced a political vacuum in the countryside.'[480] In Phuoc Tuy, the Front was allowed largely uninterrupted access to the villages in the wake of the offensive and into March. This allowed them not only to gather supplies, recruits and intelligence but also to push their own version of events to the populace; an 'overall program', PSA Thomas Austin III wrote, designed 'to cause the people to lose confidence in the elected GVN and the GVN military units ability to protect them.'[481]

This uninterrupted access occurred because local government units were largely unwilling to leave their compounds and try to restore security in and around the hamlets. DPSA Mulcahy pointed in March to a 'shortage of military personnel and a basic defensive-mindedness, especially during the hours of darkness', as reasons why Territorial Forces were not undertaking more aggressive operations.[482] In Long Le, District Chief Vo Sanh Kim refused to return to the district compound in Hoa Long, as did his police force. In his absence, the Territorials in the town remained largely inactive. The commander of the AATTV, on an inspection visit in February, found that 'a general air of apathy exists throughout the compound' as a result.[483] This lack of security also hamstrung the RD program. By March only two out of six teams were living in their designated 1968 hamlets, and in one case that was because another team had been co-located with them as a security force. The other three spent time in their hamlets but concentrated overwhelmingly on personal security.[484]

This paralysis had the effect of even further undermining any confidence in the government on the part of the population. As Ahern eloquently put it, the absence of security, and the cadre in particular, 'mocked GVN pretensions as the

[480] Ahern, *Vietnam Declassified*, p. 287.
[481] LTCOL Thomas Austin III, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy Province – Period Ending 31 March 1968', 31 March 1968, p. 1; Province Reports 1968 (2), Box 1575, A1 731, RG 0472, NARA.
[482] Mulcahy, 'Comments of the Deputy Province Senior Adviser', 29 March 1968, p. 1; Province Reports 1968 (2), Box 1575, A1 731, RG 0472, NARA.
[483] 'Monthly Report – February 1968, Australian Army Training Team Vietnam', p. 4; Annex B to Part B HQ AFV Monthly Report Feb 68, R723/1/13/4, AWM98.
[484] Austin, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy Province', 31 March 68, Province Reports 1968 (2), Box 1575, A1 731, RG 0472, NARA.

protector of loyal villagers'.[485] The obvious lack of security undercut the entire edifice of pacification. 'You cannot expose the population to the inroads of the enemy each night,' wrote John Paul Vann in late March, 'and reasonably expect them to willingly cooperate with the government or to overtly reject the Viet Cong.'[486] Mulcahy noted the population of Phuoc Tuy was extremely anxious; when two members of the Front attempted to surrender in the hamlet of Long Huong, they created a panic that sent a stampede of people into nearby Baria. Confidence in security and thus in the government was at a significant low.

The government paralysis also ensured that responsibility for responding to the Tet offensive fell to 1ATF and its new commander, Brigadier R.L. Hughes. Hughes had assumed command of the Task Force in October 1967, having already had substantial combat experience, first as a company commander in New Guinea and then as a battalion commander in Korea.[487] Both during his time in Vietnam and subsequently, Hughes was characterised as being more interested in fighting the 'big unit' war than his predecessor, with this coming at the expense of security in Phuoc Tuy.[488] This is not accurate. By his own admission Hughes was not overly concerned with either civic action or the training of local forces, but he nonetheless authorised the raising of a Mobile Advisory Training Team (MATT) that served as a precursor to later, more systematic efforts to train the province forces. While it is also true that the Task Force made a number of large, sustained deployments outside of Phuoc Tuy during his time in command, this was hardly Hughes' decision. As was the case with COBURG and the later TOAN THANG I and II, the presence of the Task Force had been requested by IIFFV and confirmed by COMAFV. Hughes stated after the war that he had largely agreed with Graham's operational concept and had done little to change it.[489] With the addition of a third infantry battalion, a tank squadron and an adequate headquarters staff, however, Hughes possessed

[485] Ahern, *Vietnam Declassified*, p. 287.
[486] John Paul Vann, 'Thoughts on Pacification', 1 April 1968, p. 1; Miscellaneous, Box 1575, A1 731, RG 0472, NARA.
[487] Transcript of interview with BRIG R.L. Hughes by LTCOL R.F. Morison, Canberra, 24 March 1971, p. 3; 2 AWM 107.
[488] Frost, *Australia's War in Vietnam*, pp. 107–108.
[489] Interview with BRIG R.L. Hughes, 24 March 1971, p. 3, pp. 28-29; 2 AWM 107.

greater flexibility in simultaneously undertaking missions into base areas and around the villages than had been the case for Graham.

The initial Australian reaction to the offensive in Phuoc Tuy was a series of cordon and search operations in Hoa Long, Ap Suoi Nghe and Long Dien. Both the search of Ap Suoi Nghe on 18–19 February and the search of Long Dien on 20–21 February were relatively uneventful, resulting in the detention of 19 and 32 suspected Front members respectively, and various other draft dodgers and AWOL soldiers.[490] The search of Hoa Long (Operation OAKLEIGH) between 15 and 17 February was more difficult. The cordon trapped at least ten members of the Chau Duc District Company plus an unknown number of other guerrillas, who all attempted to shoot their way out. Nine were killed and a further two captured, while 25 suspected Front members were also detained. Although one of the more successful C&S operations mounted by 1ATF, OAKLEIGH appears to have had little lasting effect on the Front's access to Hoa Long.[491]

Operation COBURG finished on 1 March and the bulk of the Task Force returned to Nui Dat. It quickly became clear to Hughes that 1ATF would have to mount a more sustained effort to restore security to Long Dien and Dat Do districts. As he put it postwar:

> When we got back to Nui Dat, the situation in the Province was such that every village guerrilla had joined up with the local VC units and they had been rampaging around the place…I found myself fighting back in this Long Dien village area with a need to clear the enemy from constantly coming in every night. This was the start of, and the cause, of the operations which we underook to clear the Long Hais area.[492]

The immediate catalyst for an excursion into the Long Hais was two attacks on the district compounds in Hoa Long and Long Dien in the early hours of 27

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[490] Annex A 'Intelligence Summary', to LTCOL Eric H. Smith, 'Operation DANDENONG Combat After Action Report', 29 February 1968; 7/7/23 AWM95 and Annex A, 'Intelligence Summary', to LTCOL Eric H. Smith, 'Operation CLAYTON Combat After Action Report', 1 March 1968; 7/7/23 AWM95.
[491] Annex A, 'Intelligence Summary', to LTCOL Eric H. Smith, 'Operation OAKLEIGH Combat After Action Report', 28 February 1968; 7/7/23 AWM95; McNeill and Ekins, *On the Offensive,* p. 448 and pp. 322–324.
[492] Interview with Brigadier R.L. Hughes, 24 March 1971, p. 19; 2 AWM 107.

February. Sweeps by 1ATF in both villages the next day resulted in no contacts with the enemy. Seven days later Hughes issued the order for Operation PINNAROO.

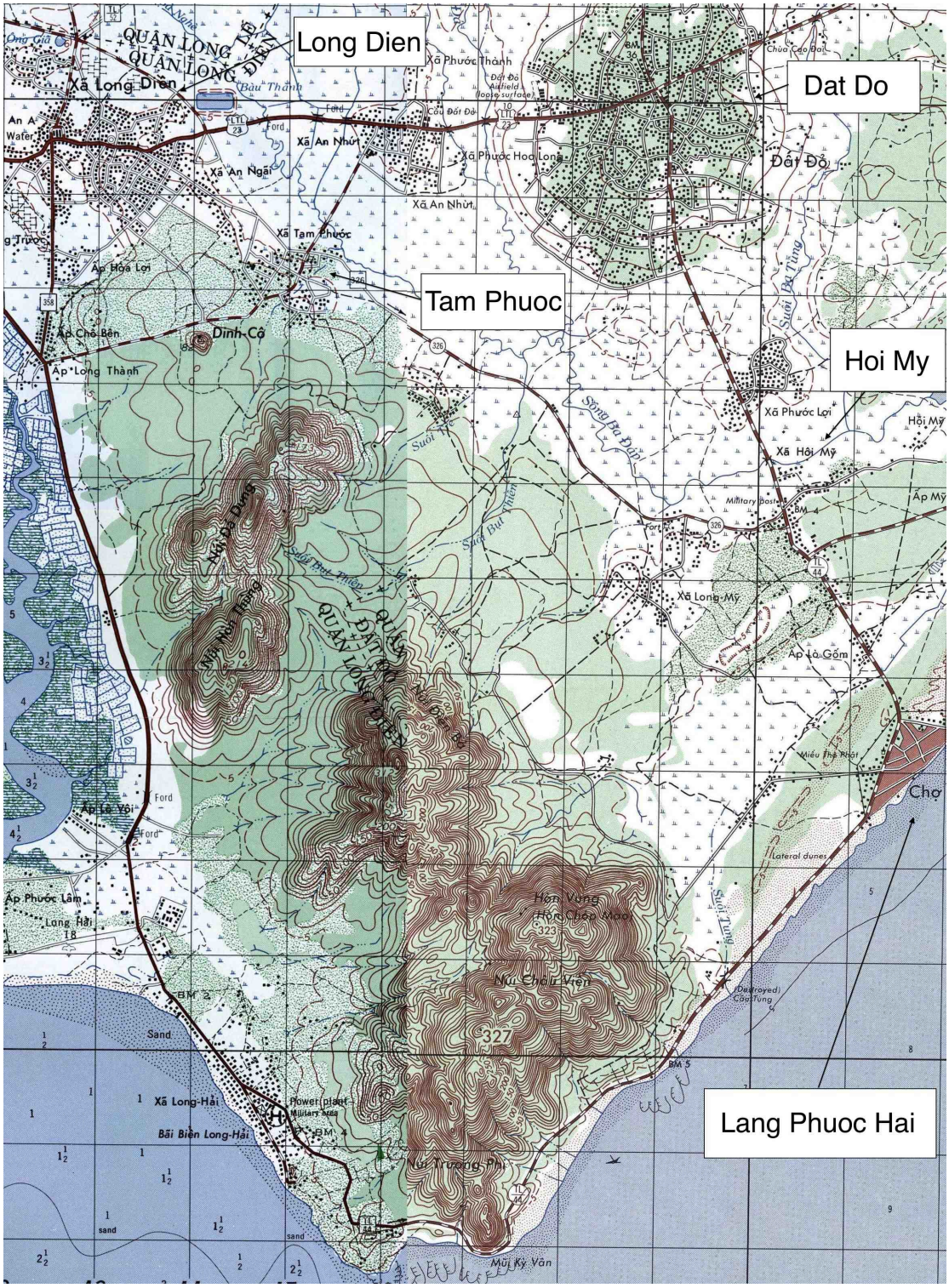
The stated objective of PINNAROO was 'to capture the Long Hai mountain complex' and it represented the most comprehensive effort to deal with the Minh Dam base area since the beginning of the war [see Map 5].[493] Two previous efforts had been made by Free World forces – HOLLANDIA, conducted by the 173rd Airborne between 9 and 17 June 1966, and RENMARK, a three-day search and destroy mission conducted by 5RAR in February 1967. Both had been comparatively short operations which had pushed units into the hills. In contrast, PINNAROO was a highly methodical operation conducted in six stages that would take over a month to accomplish. Phases 1 and 2 consisted of establishing a cordon through the areas of dense scrub and jungle to the east and west of the hills that led to Long Dien, Dat Do, and the villages along Route 44. Phase 3 was an intensive bombardment of the hills by US and Australian ships, aircraft and artillery. Phase 4 was the clearing of the low ground to the east of the Long Hais, and Phase 5 the clearing of the southern and central highlands. The operation was to conclude with land clearing around the edges of the hills, intended primarily to deprive the Front of physical cover as it moved out of the area but also to open up land for agriculture.[494]

The operation began on 6 March, with 2RAR beginning to move into blocking and ambush positions on the western side of the Long Hais. This rough cordon was completed two days later when 3RAR moved to the eastern side. The bombardment of the hills had begun on the 2 March and would continue for two weeks. The next day, both battalions moved into the hills. For the infantry, it was dirty, tiring and particularly dangerous work which well illustrated the frustrations of fighting a counterinsurgency. Contacts were few and rarely against more than a handful of enemy. The chief danger came from mines and booby traps, and casualties steadily mounted. For the NLF, PINNAROO was a

[493] BRIG R.L. Hughes, 'OpO 10/68 (Op PINNAROO)', 4 March 1968, p. 1; 1/4/90 AWM95.
[494] BRIG R.L. Hughes, 'OpO 10/68 (Op PINNAROO)', 4 March 1968, pp. 1-2; 1/4/90 AWM95.

nerve-wracking experience that pitted the physical strength of the Long Hai cave systems against the destructive power of Free World bombs and shells. It was a contest the caves largely won. The Dat Do history described the hills as being 'wrapped in smoke and thick dust as a result of the bombing and shelling by the invaders'. Fires started by the bombardment stripped much of the concealing jungle away, but ultimately the caves survived.[495] On 18 March C Company 3RAR took the summit of Hill 323, the highest peak in the Long Hais, unopposed. In what was becoming something of a Task Force tradition concerning Vietnamese mountaintops, they raised an Australian flag. Although Phase 6 continued until 15 April, the Task Force was out of the hills themselves by 26 March. Operation PINNAROO resulted in ten Australian soldiers KIA and 36 wounded, almost all due to mines and booby traps. On the flipside 1ATF claimed 21 kills, captured four enemy and destroyed 57 camps and bunker systems.[496]

[495] Huong (ed), *The History of the Struggle*, p. 33.
[496] McNeill and Ekins, *On the Offensive*, p. 338.



Map 5: The Minh Dam Special Zone, c. 1967. This map shows clearly how the hills dominated nearby villages, particularly the Long Dien and Dat Do complexes, and how thick foliage and scrub often extended to the very edge of hamlets, providing ideal cover for Front units. Source: Author's Collection.

The Task Force viewed PINNAROO as a victory, but the operation posed questions about the future of pacification in Phuoc Tuy. Hughes had initiated PINNAROO in an effort to stop Front infiltration into the populated areas of the province. The critical role the Long Hais played in the security, or lack thereof, in the province was emphasised by the PSA in his March report:

> The citizens of the Province, as well as GVN political and military personnel, and the VCI in those two districts recognize the immediate and far reaching importance of this operation in eliminating the constant threat posed by VC control of the Long Hai mountains. Fear and tension among the population of these two districts has been reduced considerably since the Australian operation began. Most residents of Tam Phuoc village evacuated their homes and moved to a non-sponsored refugee camp in a rice paddy midway between Long Dien village and An-Nhut village following the VC Tet attack. These villagers are all returning to their homes in Tam Phuoc Village, realizing the security provided by the Australians in the Long Hai mountains. Few citizens of Tam Phuoc were refugees because of loss of their homes but moved for security reasons.[497]

Yet this statement begged the question of exactly how PINNAROO had eliminated 'the constant threat' of the NLF in the Long Hais. It was certainly not through the destruction of Front units within the hills themselves. Hughes readily admitted after the war that 1ATF lacked the troops needed to cordon the south-west boundary of the Long Hais and that he was sure this offered the enemy an easy escape route.[498] In addition, Communist histories claim that upwards of 100 cadre and soldiers, many wounded, remained undiscovered in a large cave system throughout PINNAROO.[499] In reality the security during PINNAROO stemmed primarily from the barrier created between the population and the hills by 1ATF's infantry cordon, but this was a purely temporary expedient.

PINNAROO was thus in many ways symptomatic of the dilemmas of security that existed not only in Phuoc Tuy but also throughout South Vietnam, and which helped frame the postwar debates around attrition and population

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[497] Austin, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy Province', 31 March 68, p. 1; Province Reports 1968 (2), Box 1575, A1 731, RG 0472, NARA.
[498] Interview with Brigadier R.L. Hughes, 24/3/71, AWM 107 2, p. 20.
[499] Huong (ed), *The History of the Struggle*, p. 33.

security. Military operations into Front base areas could be extremely effective in disrupting enemy logistics and robbing Front units of the initiative. Yet even the most successful of these operations had a temporary effect; the Front always returned and rebuilt. In the Long Hais, this trend was exacerbated by the nature of the terrain. Operation PINNAROO deluged the area with firepower, including no fewer than eight B-52 strikes.[500] These may have been effective in destroying man-made camps and bunker systems, but they had little effect on the granite cave systems within the hills proper. Equally, an extensive demolition program by Australian engineers destroyed only a fraction of the caves in the area, the 3RAR after-action report noting that '[t]here are many smaller caves which it has been impractical to destroy and which could be used by the VC in the future.'[501] Many cave systems also went undiscovered as 1ATF simply lacked the troops to properly search the labyrinth of gullies and re-entrants through the mountains. PINNAROO therefore demonstrated that the Minh Dam was even more resistant than most base areas to serious disruption – a particularly worrying fact given its proximity to the populated areas of the province.

The land-clearing program that constituted Phase 6 of PINNAROO was an acknowledgement of the need for a more long-term solution, and such clearing continued in various forms for much of the rest of 1968. Although never formally stated, the creation of this physical boundary between the villages of Long Dien and Dat Do districts and the jungle of the Long Hais themselves was an acknowledgement of the basic suitability of Jackson and Graham's ideas of 'breaking the links'. The Minh Dam could not be destroyed by Free World firepower, and it was too large to be permanently occupied by Free World troops. It could, however, be successfully isolated from the villages by troops patrolling and ambushing on its outskirts, in ground prepared for them – an operational concept that would later be proved successful by 1ATF for periods in 1969 and 1970.[502] However, the Task Force's limited number of troops and potential commitments to other areas meant it could not be relied

[500] McNeill and Ekins, *On the Offensive*, p. 335.
[501] 'Operation PINNAROO – Operational Analysis', 30 April 1968, p. 9; 7/3/60 AWM95.
[502] See Chs 6 and 7.

on to implement this cordon over a long period. The responsibility had to lie with the local RF/PF, whose theoretical role was population security and who possessed the strength to successfully cordon the Minh Dam. Yet, as will be seen, translating theory into practice would prove one of the major stumbling blocks for pacification in Phuoc Tuy.

Hughes had also saturated the Long Hais in explosives, due to the growing awareness among senior Australian leadership of the threat posed by mines in the Long Dien-Dat Do region. RENMARK had already shown how local NLF could use knowledge of likely approach routes into the Long Hais to construct elaborate mine traps that could cause significant casualties to Australian units. To this was added the intelligence provided by a Front defector that a significant number of M16 mines had been lifted from the barrier minefield and re-deployed in defensive positions around the Long Hais.[503] Hughes hoped that the two-week bombardment of the Long Hais during the opening phases of PINNAROO, and the B-52 strikes in particular, would destroy many of these mines.[504] How far this occurred remains open to question. Hughes was satisfied that casualties in the operation were not excessive, but most of those that occurred were as a result of mines. Perhaps most telling is that as part of Operation COOKTOWN ORCHID, which followed PINNAROO in April, Hughes directed that an effort be made to clear part of the minefield. It failed, as field engineers were unable to devise an efficient, safe method for clearing the mines.[505]

With the conclusion of PINNAROO and COOKTOWN ORCHID, 1ATF once again turned its attention to Bien Hoa province. For much of the next year the Task Force would concentrate on operations either outside Phuoc Tuy or in the remote base areas on the province fringes. The major exception to this was in August 1968, during the 'Third General Offensive'. As its name suggests, this offensive was the third and final one mounted by the Communists in 1968. It consisted largely of attacks by fire in and around the Saigon area. Unlike the

[503] Lockhart, *The Minefield,* pp. 110–11.
[504] Interview with Brigadier R.L. Hughes, 24 March 1971, p. 20; 2 AWM 107.
[505] McNeill and Ekins, *On the Offensive*, pp. 344-345.

Second General Offensive in May, it impacted Phuoc Tuy – Long Dien was again occupied by a sizeable Front force, as was Dat Do, while there were attacks by fire against outlying areas. Why this is so is unclear. The Dat Do history acknowledges that such fighting occurred, but does not link it with an offensive, instead describing such operations as spoiling attacks aimed at upsetting an imminent attack by the Australians into the Minh Dam.[506]

No such Australian operation was planned, however, and, indeed, unlike the attacks in February, by early August 1ATF and provincial leadership were well aware that an NLF offensive would occur later in the month. On the 6 August Brigadier Hughes pulled 1RAR out of Operation PLATYPUS and on 8 August the battalion began Operation NOWRA, in which it deployed into defensive positions around Baria. On the 11 August a company-sized NLF force moved into Long Dien but withdrew after a brief engagement with the local Territorials. In light of this, and 'in view of intelligence information indicating that a battalion sized attack on BARIA or LONG DIEN was imminent', on 16 August 1RAR's deployments changed slightly so that the battalion could react to an attack against either town.[507]

The Third General Offensive began on the night of 17–18 August with attacks around and within Saigon. In Phuoc Tuy the only noticeable violence was the assassination of the hamlet chief and deputy hamlet chief in Ap Suoi Nghe, just five months after the deaths of the incumbents.[508] It was not until the early hours of the 22 August that the attacks on Dat Do and Long Dien took place. These attacks were of a now familiar format. In Dat Do, C25 Company and local guerrillas fired mortar and RPG rounds into the market place and police compound, before dispersing in the town and engaging only in harassing fire.[509] In Long Dien, approximately 100 members of D445 made a similar effort. Unlike

[506] Huong (ed), *The History of the Struggle*, p. 35.
[507] LTCOL P.H. Bennett, '1RAR After Action Report 7/68 Op NOWRA', 9 September 1968, p. 2; 7/1/89 AWM95.
[508] 'Enemy Situation – Phuoc Tuy Province as at 231400H Aug 68', 23 August 1968; 1/4/113 PART 3 AWM95.
[509] '1 Australian Task Force Intsum Number 234-68, Period covered from 220001H to 222400H Aug 68', 22 August 1968; 1/4/113 PART 3 AWM95.

in most attacks of this type throughout the war, but in a very similar manner to that of the previous attack on Long Dien in February, the Communists did not withdraw quickly. Instead they mounted a more protracted resistance, against a 1ATF force in Long Dien on the 22 August and an ARVN force in Dat Do the next day, before withdrawing into their base areas.[510] Front histories claimed the fighting in August as a victory that had prevented an Australian attack into the Minh Dam.[511] Within 1ATF the fighting within Long Dien was seen as a clear Australian victory. During the fighting 1RAR claimed it had killed 29 of the enemy for the loss of 13 of its own wounded, and had successfully cleared the NLF out of the town. They had done so under difficult conditions, with extensive restrictions on their ability to fire in order to protect the civilian population.

Despite Australian tactical success, the August offensive helped underline the serious problems facing pacification in Phuoc Tuy. In the immediate aftermath of the February offensive, both Thomas Austin III and Mulcahy had argued that the fighting was a potential turning point for the government in Phuoc Tuy. 'The VC have given us a tremendous opportunity to expose them and to destroy them,' Mulcahy wrote in early March. 'It could be that if the GVN loses this opportunity, it may never have another.'[512] A month later he concluded a report with a flourish: 'I believe we are, again, on the threshold of significant achievement in Vietnam, and in Phuoc Tuy Province in particular. The problems are real and significant, but not insurmountable.'[513]

By June, this optimistic tone had evaporated. The new PSA, Colonel William H. Young, delivered a summary of events within Phuoc Tuy from January to June in his inaugural monthly report. The Tet Offensive, he stated, had led to a precipitous drop in security that crippled the Revolutionary Development effort. The security situation had gradually improved in March

[510] Bennett, '1RAR After Action Report 7/68 Op NOWRA', 9 September 1968, p. 2; 7/1/89 AWM95.
[511] Huong (ed), *The History of the Struggle*, p. 35.
[512] William F. Mulcahy, 'Comments of the Deputy Province Senior Adviser', 3 March 1968, p. 2; Province Reports 1968 (2), Box 1575, A1 731, RG 0472, NARA.
[513] Mulcahy, 'Comments of the Deputy Province Senior Adviser', 29 March 1968, p. 3; Province Reports 1968 (2), Box 1575, A1 731, RG 0472, NARA.

and April, in part because of PINNAROO. It had declined significantly again in May, however, 'with an increased incident rate and an increased boldness on the part of the Viet Cong.'[514] This did not change in June, as the NLF showed 'an increasing willingness to fight and appeared determined to carry out an ever widening series of attacks and other actions'.[515] It was clear that the Front held the initiative in Phuoc Tuy and it was they, not the government, who dictated security conditions in the populated areas.

Young's conclusions were echoed in a report produced by CORDS officer Dale B. Pfeiffer in July. Pfeiffer was scathing about the conduct of pacification within the province:

> On paper, success would seem to be assured. In practice, the program has fallen short of its expectations…The pacification program in Phuoc Tuy as it presently stands does not constitute a serious threat to the VC. Despite the presence of nearly 5,000 armed GVN personnel and the support provided by the Australian Task Force, the enemy continues to assume the initiative both militarily and politically.[516]

Pfeiffer argued that a reliance on inaccurate statistics had produced a misleading picture of the status of pacification within the province. The American Hamlet Evaluation System suggested that villages in which the Front was routinely active at night, such as those in Duc Thanh, were nevertheless secure. 'There is no realistic basis for such optimism', Pfeiffer wrote. 'The VC enjoy an immunity provided by an ineffective pacification effort.'[517]

The lack of security that allowed these penetrations of hamlets also hamstrung the RD program. A month after Tet, just one RD team had been functioning as intended, with the remainder either working in their target hamlets only in daylight, focusing solely on their own security or simply being inactive. By May, as Front activity again began to rise, nothing substantial had

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[514] William H. Young, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy Province – Period Ending 30 June 1968', 30 June 1968, p. 1; Province Reports 1968 (2), Box 1575, A1 731, RG 0472, NARA.
[515] Young, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy Province', 30 June 1968, p. 1; Province Reports 1968 (2), Box 1575, A1 731, RG 0472, NARA.
[516] Dale B. Pfeiffer, 'Evaluation Report: Pacification Program in Phuoc Tuy Province', 19 September 1968, D/4/8 AWM257.
[517] Pfeiffer, 'Evaluation Report', 19 September 1968, D/4/8 AWM257.

changed. Only two teams – PT-1 in Hai Lac hamlet, Phuoc Hai, and PT-5 in An Hoa hamlet, An Ngai – were 'carrying out normal cadre activity', reported PSA Austin. Even this was provisional as only PT-1 had adequate security, provided by a company of 4/48 ARVN and a PF platoon. The remaining five teams were 'concerned with team security or the lack thereof'.[518] Austin's replacement, Young, found that although only two teams were now sheltering in district compounds overnight, the other five had built their own compounds in which to shelter. This had the same basic effect on security and confidence as the previous arrangement and ensured that, while 'the attitude of the people toward RD Cadre Teams is of a positive nature…the lack of security that exists in the province [ensures] the people will not voluntarily cooperate'.[519] In others words, the lack of security was undercutting the major contribution made by the RD cadre to pacification, rendering the program virtually irrelevant.

Why this lack of security existed vexed not only Team 89 but higher headquarters. In June DEPCORDS Robert Komer fired off a missive to the PSA Young:

> I do not understand why the security situation is not being improved more rapidly in Phuoc Tuy. Why have the provincial forces maintained primarily a defensive posture during May, as reported in the III CTZ monthly pacification overview? Most other provinces are conducting expanded local operations. Our MACV reading of local enemy OB [Order of Battle] in Phuoc Tuy suggests that there are few enemy forces in comparison to province assets. I'm also concerned that only three of seven RD teams remain in their hamlets at night.[520]

On the message John Paul Vann scribbled his agreement with Komer and emphasised the need for Young to prod the province government, and in particular the RF/PF, into action. The lack of action was highlighted by figures put forward by Pfeiffer in his July report. Between January and May the RF/PF in Phuoc Tuy had killed 110 enemy for the loss of 95 of their own, while 28

[518] LTCOL Thomas Austin III, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy Province – Period Ending 31 May 1968', 31 May 1968, p. 5; Province Reports 1968 (2), Box 1575, A1 731, RG 472, NARA.
[519] Young, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy Province', 30 June 1968, p. 8; Province Reports 1968 (2), Box 1575, A1 731, RG 0472, NARA.
[520] R.W. Komer to PSA, Phuoc Tuy, 17 June 1968; Miscellaneous, Box 1575, A1 731, RG 472, NARA.

ARVN had been killed in action while killing only 19 of the enemy. These figures, Pfeiffer argued 'substantiate what is obvious in the province – i.e. that these units are not actively seeking to engage the enemy, but rather are employed principally in static defense'.[521]

In September Mulcahy – who had continued as DPSA after Young's arrival and was Acting PSA for several months in late 1968 – wrote a detailed response to Komer's question. In contrast to the optimism he had felt in February, Mulcahy agreed with the assessments of Komer and Pfeiffer. 'The enemy takes the initiative almost invariably,' he wrote. 'He invites contact when and where he wills, and maintains contact or breaks it to suit himself.'[522] RF/PF operations usually took place in the hours of daylight and were rarely based on sound intelligence. When night operations did occur they were 'notorious for lack of contact, avoidance of contact, and have been almost completely devoid of results'.[523] Operations by Territorial Forces were, in other words, efforts to tick statistical markers rather than to actually contact Front personnel as they moved in and out of the villages.

Mulcahy offered a number of explanations for this. Operations often occurred because of 'pressure from higher headquarters either to utilize assets which the Division has on its hands, or simply to just do something'.[524] Long-term planning of operations based on sound intelligence did not occur. Airmobile operations were particularly symptomatic of this short-term attitude:

> The 18th Division has allocated helicopters to Phuoc Tuy four days each month, therefore there must be four heliborne operations. These operations are almost predoomed to failure because they are not based on timely substantial intelligence. In one case, the S3 selected an area for operation then asked S2 if he had any intelligence to justify it…hardly the basis for committing 240 men by helicopter. The Deputy

[521] Pfeiffer, 'Evaluation Report', 19 July 1968, D/4/8, AWM257.
[522] William F. Mulcahy to Ambassador Robert W. Komer, 'Subject: July 1968 Province Report', 7 September 1968, p. 1; Province Reports 1968 (1), Box 1575, A1 731, RG 0472, NARA.
[523] Mulcahy, 'July 1968 Province Report', 7 September 1968, p. 2; Province Reports 1968 (1), Box 1575, A1 731, RG 0472, NARA.
[524] Mulcahy, 'July 1968 Province Report', 7 September 1968, pp. 2–3; Province Reports 1968 (1), Box 1575, A1 731, RG 0472, NARA.

> for Security, however, did not hesitate to ask advisers for the helicopter assets required.[525]

Mulcahy argued that this sequence of events was typical, and symptomatic of the failure of the military intelligence apparatus in Phuoc Tuy. The Vietnamese were reluctant, Mulcahy argued, to put the work into building up a comprehensive intelligence picture. Individual pieces of intelligence were either dismissed as unreliable or used as the basis for operations, with little to no effort made to corroborate them.[526]

This failure of intelligence reflected, at least in part, what Mulcahy described as 'a lack of command, control and coordination'.[527] In particular Mulcahy pointed to the absence of a Tactical Operations Centre (TOC) within the province – an issue Pfeiffer had also raised. A TOC would coordinate not only all Vietnamese operations within the province but also those of 1ATF, allowing greater coordination between the two forces. Australian units remained reluctant to conduct joint operations with local Vietnamese units, believing they greatly added to the possibilities of friendly fire while serving little useful purpose. Consequently, when 1ATF was operating near populated areas, local RF/PF were instructed to stay inside their compounds. Advisers were thus forced to acknowledge that there was some truth to the argument put forward by Vietnamese commanders that they were staying inside their compounds because they were being told to.[528] A TOC would go someway to solving this problem and ensuring province operations benefited from long-term planning and intelligence collation.

Mulcahy's fundamental explanation for the failings of pacification in Phuoc Tuy rested with leadership. The Territorial Forces' static posture was not

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[525] Mulcahy, 'July 1968 Province Report', 7 September 1968, pp. 2–3; Province Reports 1968 (1), Box 1575, A1 731, RG 0472, NARA.
[526] Mulcahy, 'July 1968 Province Report', 7 September 1968, p. 3; Province Reports 1968 (1), Box 1575, A1 731, RG 0472, NARA.
[527] Mulcahy, 'July 1968 Province Report', 7 September 1968, p. 1; Province Reports 1968 (1), Box 1575, A1 731, RG 0472, NARA.
[528] Bennett, '1RAR After Action Report 7/68 Op NOWRA', 9 September 1968, p. 3; 7/1/89 AWM95.

the result of material shortages, he argued, nor was it a result of a lack of orders:

> The Province Chief's instructions to subordinate commanders on aggressive patrolling, effective ambushing etc., are all that we or General Tri could wish. The fact remains, however, that the results have been extremely disappointing. Subordinate commanders, especially District Chiefs, appear to take such orders with a grain of salt; by the time word reaches the lowest echelon, it has been considerably diluted, or even cut off entirely.[529]

This was a dual failure of leadership. Of the five district chiefs in Phuoc Tuy only one, Captain Le Van Duc of Xuyen Moc, was unanimously considered an aggressive, competent military leader. The other four all had various failings, with Mulcahy singling out the district chiefs of Long Dien, Duc Thanh and Dat Do as being particularly poor.[530] At the same time advisers were becoming particularly frustrated with the performance of the province chief, Lieutenant-Colonel Nguyen Ba Truoc, and his apparent inability to impose himself on his subordinates. Although acknowledging the considerable difficulties that Truoc had faced since coming into the job in October 1967, Mulcahy insisted that at some point his performance had to improve.

Advisers had first begun to pay serious attention to the issue of leadership in the aftermath of Tet. A significant reason for the optimism displayed by both Austin and Mulcahy in February was their belief that the Tet Offensive had served as an acid test for the province government. 'The VC TET offensive generally accelerated and highlighted trends and attitudes already apparent,' Austin wrote in February.

> Under the unusual pressure, Service Chiefs (and their departments) who had been exercising good to outstanding leadership rose to meet the crisis, and maintained operations despite obstacles. On the other hand, marginally effective Chiefs and departments collapsed under

[529] Mulcahy, 'July 1968 Province Report', 7 September 1968, p. 3; Province Reports 1968 (1), Box 1575, A1 731, RG 0472, NARA.
[530] Mulcahy, 'July 1968 Province Report', 7 September 1968, p. 3; Province Reports 1968 (1), Box 1575, A1 731, RG 0472, NARA.

> the additional pressure. In only one case, Public Health, did a seemingly well qualified Service Chief collapse through fear.[531]

Both Austin and his deputy hoped that the February offensive would serve as the basis for a clean-out of ineffective officials and leaders within the government. Mulcahy took an early step in this regard when he formally recommended the relief of the province Refugee and Social Welfare Chief, Mr Kiet, on 7 February. In a letter to the Province Chief Mulcahy stated that Kiet had failed to stockpile supplies or adequately equip refugee centres in the lead-up to the offensive, that in the immediate aftermath 'his control and direction of Refugee operations has been wholly inadequate', and that he should be removed from his position at once. But, in a demonstration of the relative value of patronage and merit in the South Vietnamese government, it took until August for Kiet to be replaced.[532]

The replacement of Kiet also demonstrated the limitations of the advisers' tendency to recommend the replacement of underperforming civil servants and officers. Kiet's successor was Mr Do Tranh Tron, a man initially described as 'effective and energetic' but who was soon accused of being a deeply corrupt official.[533] He had embezzled in previous appointments as refugee chief in Binh Duong province and as deputy chief and chief in Tay Ninh. He continued to receive appointments, advisers alleged, because he was paying regular bribes to the Assistant Social Welfare Minister, the Social Welfare Inspector Chief, and the III CTZ Social Welfare Inspector.[534] Tron was not merely incompetent like his predecessor, but actively corrupt. A similar situation unfolded in Long Dien district. The district chief, Major Tran Thanh Long, was considered an ineffective commander by advisers and they agitated for his removal after the February offensive. Long was finally replaced in July by Major Nguyen Van Thuong. Advisers were initially positive about Thuong but

[531] Austin, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy Province', 29 Feb 1968, p. 8; Province Reports 1968 (2), Box 1575, A1 731, RG 0472.
[532] William F. Mulcahy to Province Chief, Phuoc Tuy Province, 'Subject: Refugee/Social Welfare Chief', 7 February 1968, p. 2; Miscellaneous, Box 1575, A1 731, RG 472, NARA.
[533] William F. Mulcahy, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy – Period Ending 31 August 1968', 31 August 1968, p. 3; Province Reports 1968 (1), Box 1575, A1 731, RG 0472, NARA.
[534] R.M. Montague to Hank Cushing, 'Subject: Phuoc Tuy', 31 March 1969, p. 3; 201/1/15 PART 2 A4531, NAA..

after the August offensive he was described as 'a poor military commander' who had shown a 'total lack of aggressive spirit' in responding to the attack on Long Dien on 22 August and they again requested a dismissal.[535] Thuong was sacked a month later and Captain Dang Cong Quynh became Long Dien's third district chief in four months.

Although not remarked upon at the time within Team 89, the constant churn of personnel within the province government became a problem in Phuoc Tuy and posed long-term questions about the basis for pacification in the province. Long Le and Duc Thanh also had three different district chiefs over the course of 1968. This rapid turnover suggested that either the expectations placed on district chiefs were unrealistic or that the RVN was unable to produce enough effective leaders. There were certainly outstanding officers within the RVN and within Phuoc Tuy. Captain Le Van Duc, the district chief of Xuyen Moc, was routinely praised by advisers as possessing 'enthusiasm, aggressiveness and "can do attitude"'.[536] The physical isolation of Xuyen Moc meant it was a low priority for pacification within the province, which made its success in meeting targets all the more impressive. DSA Woodrow W. Barbee Jr attributed this success solely to Duc's leadership. It was, therefore, a tremendous blow when Duc was killed while leading a patrol on 27 October 1968. As Barbee noted, 'none of his subordinate officers are capable of providing the leadership required of a District Chief.'[537]

Duc was not the only district chief lost to enemy action in Phuoc Tuy during 1968. Captain Dao Van Quynh of Dat Do was wounded on 23 August while leading an effort to evict an enemy force from Dat Do town. He had been previously described as an aggressive leader, but in his August report Mulcahy was brutally straightforward: 'The District Chief of Dat Do lost a leg in action

[535] Mulcahy, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy', 31 August 1968, p. 3; Province Reports 1968 (1), Box 1575, A1 731, RG 0472, NARA.
[536] CAPT Paul Y. Sugimoto to CAPT Le Van Duc, 'Monthly Letter to the District Chief', 14 April 1968; Monthly Letter to Counterpart 1968, Box 1575, A1 731, RG 0472, NARA.
[537] CAPT Woodrow W. Barbee Jr, 'District Adviser's Monthly Report', 30 October 1968; Province Reports 1968 (1), Box 1575, A1 731, RG 0472, NARA.

and will be replaced in two weeks. No loss; not aggressive.'[538] The differing opinions on Quynh underscore both the problems of the advisory effort and those faced by historians of Vietnam fifty years later. Advisers confronted barriers of culture (both national and institutional) and language in trying to build relationships with their Vietnamese counterparts, a task not helped by US rotational policies.[539] Monthly letters from advisers to these Vietnamese counterparts, many of which survive in US archives, display a strange mix of patronising language and stiff formality, as if written by an adult trying to encourage a dim-witted child.

It is not surprising that junior officers within the US Army put such a premium on aggression and 'can-do' attitudes, but it leads to lingering questions about the accuracy of adviser assessments. Were they too quick to judge their opposite numbers? A revealing instance occurred in Phuoc Tuy during the fighting in August. Major Thuong, the Long Dien district chief, was recommended for dismissal by advisers on the basis that during the fighting in Long Dien on 22 August he had twice voluntarily broken contact with an enemy force. In a letter to Major General Robert Wetherill of CORDS written the following day, advisers pointed out that this specifically broke the standing orders of the III CTZ commander General Tri and that as a consequence Thuong should be relieved.[540] Vietnamese authorities, at Wetherill's request, launched an investigation into the accusations.

In the face of this investigation, Thuong, with the support of province chief Truoc, vigorously defended his innocence. Thuong argued that he had performed his duty and that the accusations stemmed from American misconceptions about what constituted adequate leadership:

> But this adviser [DSA Hall] has the idea that during attacking or moving, the district chief must be always forward front of troops [sic].

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[538] Mulcahy, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy', 31 August 1968, p. 4; Province Reports 1968 (1), Box 1575, A1 731, RG 0472, NARA.
[539] Gregory Daddis, *No Sure Victory*, pp. 170–171.
[540] LTCOL. Edward H. Bertram Jr to Mr John P. Vann, 'Comments on Long Dien Activities, 22 August 1968', 22 November 1968; Province Report 1968, Box 1576, A1 731, RG 0472, NARA.

> He had a wrong idea and did not realize anything except the mission of maintaing security in that hours. The district chief had to pose many difficult duties such as: Removing people to a certain place in order to protect population in the operation area, and their property in the town.[541]

Thuong went on to state that he believed the real reason Hall had called for his relief was that Thuong had refused to allow Hall to act as the de facto commander on the day in question. Whatever the case, the Americans ultimately won the argument: Thuong was relieved on 25 September.[542] But the case foreshadowed future problems in the relationship between advisers and Vietnamese leaders in the province and the ways in which those leaders were judged.

The other significant concern adviser harboured by late 1968 was the progress of the ICEX anti-infrastructure effort, by then known as the Phoenix program. In December 1967 the RVN had formally adopted ICEX and in the process had renamed it as the 'Phung Hoang' program, after a mythical Buddhist bird.[543] In English it came to be known as the Phoenix program, although advisers would use the two names interchangeably. As noted earlier, ICEX was designed to coordinate the actions of all police, paramilitary and military units against the Viet Cong Infrastructure. In practice this involved the establishment of Province and District Intelligence Operations Coordinating Centers (PIOCC and DIOCC). Intelligence from all relevant agencies – such as the National Police, Provincial Reconnaissance Units and RF/PF – was supposed to flow into the DIOCC and PIOCCs, where it would be collated into detailed dossiers on individual members of the infrastructure. These dossiers would not only allow these individuals to be identified and captured or 'neutralised' (a euphemism for killed), but also allow for more thorough interrogations to be conducted. Ideally, these thorough interrogations would allow Phoenix staff to

[541] 'Statement of Major Nguyen Van Thuong ', 11 September 1968, p. 2; Province Report 1968, Box 1576, A1 731, RG 0472, NARA.
[542] William F. Mulcahy, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy Province – Period Ending 30 September 1968', 30 September 1968, p. 4; Province Report 1968 (1), A1 731, RG 0472, NARA.
[543] Ahern, *Vietnam Declassified,* p. 264.

glean information on other members of the infrastructure, leading to further arrests or neutralisations.[544]

Phoenix operations began in Phuoc Tuy in October 1967 but the program stalled after the February offensive. Even when the program had regained momentum by mid-year, advisers found it unsatisfactory. Little work was put into collating dossiers. Instead, reacting to the same beliefs that had driven numerous but pointless Territorial Force operations, the province government tried to use all assets constantly in ineffective cordon and search operations. Writing in September, Mulcahy pointed as an example to a cordon and search of an area of Dat Do in which 325 men had been used to cordon an area with a 7000m circumference. Unsurprisingly an armed NLF squad was able to slip through the cordon, and just three suspects were identified out of the 300 villagers who were detained.[545]

What made this infuriating for advisers was that, independent of ICEX, 1ATF had also begun selective targeting and quickly demonstrated its effectiveness. By early 1968 the men of the Australian 1 Detachment, 1 Division Intelligence Unit, and their Vietnamese counterparts in 10 ARVN Military Intelligence Detachment were increasingly abandoning the elaborate, multi-battalion cordon and searches of the previous eighteen months in favour of smaller operations, sometimes featuring only a company of protective Australian infantry, in which individual VCI were targeted.[546] These operations – known as Acorn operations after the radio call sign of Australian intelligence units – came closer and closer to the ideal Phoenix model. In September's Acorn XVII, 10 Australians and 14 Vietnamese took just 35 minutes to apprehend 13 suspects in An Nhut. As Brigadier Hughes noted after the war, Acorn operations such as this one were quick, required few resources and resulted in minimal inconvenience for most villagers. He quickly came to prefer them to traditional

[544] Hunt, *Pacification,* p. 235.
[545] Mulcahy, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy Province', 30 September 1968, p. 3; Province Report 1968 (1), A1 731, RG 0472, NARA.
[546] G.W. Boscoe, '1ATF Attacks on VC Infrastructure Feb 68–Jul 68', 8 August 1968; 262 AWM98.

cordon and search operations.[547] According to Mulcahy the 'lesson was clear to the Province Chief, but the cordon and searches have continued with about the same result.'[548] A month later Mulcahy was, with government officials still resisting the implementation of selective targeting techniques, 'forced to conclude that GVN officials are not vitally interested and in some cases are opposed to effective operations against the VCI.'[549]

One of the few bright spots advisers could find against this backdrop of failures was the economic programs within the province. Mulcahy wrote in August 'that the status of pacification in Phuoc Tuy represents a real paradox. Military security has steadily declined since Tet, but civil programs continue to make steady progress.'[550] The programs he referred to were those of the technical cadre, such as agriculture and animal husbandry, and ongoing civic action efforts by 1ATF and US forces. But really this was not a paradox at all. Throughout 1968 the Front had leveraged the insecurity of the population for political gain. That this generally did not involve campaigns against economic pacification programs simply emphasised those programs' marginal utility. As with the villagers surveyed in Hoa Long in 1967, the population may have been grateful for the material largesse of pacification but it remained a secondary influence on their loyalties.

The nature of the war in Vietnam changed significantly over the course of 1968. President Johnson's decision not to seek re-election paved the way for Richard Nixon to gain the White House in November. In Hanoi, the failure of the Tet Offensive to provoke a general uprising was a blow for Le Duan and helped bring the Party to the negotiating table in Paris. Nixon's election and the beginning of talks were the first steps in the long process of American disengagement from Vietnam. As will be examined in the next chapter,

[547] Interview with Brigadier R.L. Hughes, 24 March 1971, p. 26; 2 AWM 107.
[548] Mulcahy, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy Province', 30 September 1968, p. 3; Province Report 1968 (1), Box 1575, A1 731, RG 0472, NARA.
[549] William F. Mulcahy, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy Province – Period Ending 31 October 1968', 31 October 1968, p. 3; Province Reports 1968 (1), Box 1575, A1 731, RG 0472, NARA.
[550] Mulcahy, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy', 31 August 1968, p. 1; Province Reports 1968 (1), Box 1575, A1 731, RG 0472, NARA.

pacification also underwent a significant change in the final months of 1968. Emboldened by the Front's failures over the course of the year and eager to strengthen the RVN's hand at the Paris negotiations, the Americans pushed for a short-term nationwide pacification offensive that aimed to maximise the amount of population under government control. This offensive represented a turn away from the ambitious, if ill-defined, goal of Revolutionary Development in favour of a more simple effort. The population would be secured by military force, and then be won over by a combination of economic and political inducements.

In Phuoc Tuy, the events of 1968 exposed the problems that would define the pacification program for the next three years. The February and August offensives showed that a significant minority of the population continued to support the Front, with villagers in traditionally pro-Front areas such as Long Dien offering the Communists active support during the fighting. However, these offensives also showed the limits of this popular support. As was explored earlier in this thesis, support for the Front stemmed from a variety of sources ranging from economic rationalism to nationalism to family tradition. The Front's use of violence in villages, and its cavalier treatment of civilian lives and properties, eroded some of these sources of support. While direct or indirect intimidation and physical coercion could undoubtedly be used by the Front to gain compliance, they could not act as substitutes for a positive program. Far from inspiring the popular uprising Le Duan dreamt of, the violence of 1968 in Phuoc Tuy threatened to alienate villagers by negating the incentives the Front's political and economic program offered them.

Yet, thanks to its own chronic weaknesses, the government in Phuoc Tuy was unable to exploit this situation over the course of 1968. During the fighting in February ARVN, RF/PF and National Police personnel behaved almost as poorly towards the population as the troops of the Front, with widespread looting and poor discipline reported. The failure of the government forces to keep the Front out of the villages, and the abysmal performance of the ARVN units tasked with relieving Long Dien, reinforced existing perceptions of

government inadequacy and weakness – particularly when contrasted with the performance of Australian troops. The mass resignation of Long Dien's village officials and the prominent failure of many civilian service chiefs hampered efforts to deliver aid to refugees, in turn hurting the government's ability to win the allegiance of villagers disillusioned with the Front's actions. In the immediate aftermath of the February offensive, optimism permeated CORDS – a feeling that, as shocking as the attacks over Tet had been, the damage dealt to the Front presented the pacification program with a unique opportunity to make up ground. Advisers in Phuoc Tuy shared this optimism. Yet as the months unfolded, it became clear that at the critical moment the government in Phuoc Tuy had fumbled the ball.

Advisers blamed this failure to seize the advantage on the presence of incompetent and corrupt individuals within the province hierarchy. Most of these advisers, Australian or American, were the products of a military culture that emphasised the pivotal role of commanders and the leadership they provided in influencing the performance of their organisations, saw battle as the ultimate test of these commanders, and demanded that anyone who failed this test be ruthlessly removed. Unsurprisingly, they increasingly came to see the problems facing pacification in Phuoc Tuy as revolving around the failures of individual leaders and saw the removal of these leaders as the solution. That many of the replacements were themselves quickly judged to be inadequate and were removed did not elicit comment from advisers. For the moment, the possibility that the RVN might be unable to produce competent and honest officers and civil servants in sufficient numbers was not considered. Yet this was to become one of the central problems dogging pacification for the remainder of the war.

Acquiring effective leaders would be particularly crucial if the province RF/PF were to be brought up to speed. The February and August offensives and the interregnum between them had reinforced the critical role population security played in pacification – and the primary responsibility for this lay with the RF/PF. Beginning in 1969, a concerted effort would be made by both 1ATF

and Team 89 to improve both population security and the ability of the RF/PF to maintain it in the long term. The following chapter explores this effort and the changes of strategy that prompted it – at both a national level with General Creighton Abrams' 'One War' concept and the Accelerated Pacification Campaign, and in Phuoc Tuy with 1ATF and a return to 'breaking the links'.

Chapter 7. 'This Month's Fairy Story.'

November 1968–August 1969.[551]

This chapter covers a period of the war in Vietnam that saw a series of changes in Free World strategy and policy that, while not as revolutionary as is claimed by some historians, were nonetheless significant. At the direction of General Westmoreland's successor as commander of MACV, General Creighton Abrams, a new emphasis was placed from late 1968 onwards on Free World military units supporting pacification and securing populated areas (a policy known colloquially as 'one war'). A change of approach also occurred within the pacification program. Robert Komer and his deputy (and later, replacement) William Colby succeeded in convincing both Abrams and President Thieu to authorise the Accelerated Pacification Campaign, an audacious land grab that aimed to bring 1,000 hamlets under government control in the space of three months. Although the campaign was of only short duration, it marked a subtle but important shift away from the cadre-driven Revolutionary Development program. Instead, pacification would now rely on the re-establishment of 'normal' government bureaucracy behind a security shield. Finally, there was the policy of 'Vietnamisation', announced publicly in June 1969. The Nixon Administration hoped that by giving the South Vietnamese large amounts of training and modern equipment, the RVNAF could become strong enough to meet the Communist challenge without US troops on the ground. This massive injection of funds and effort had obvious implications for a pacification program that, even after the implementation of Abrams' changed priorities, was still run and protected by the South Vietnamese.

The events of this period in Phuoc Tuy offered both hope for the future of pacification and a further demonstration of the structural barriers to success

[551] 'This month's fairy story' is a pen annotation on a copy of William F. Mulcahy, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy Province – Period Ending 31 October 1968', 31 October 1968 held in R176/1/31/1 AWM98.

it faced. Under Brigadier C.M.I 'Sandy' Pearson, 1ATF made a concerted effort between May and August 1969 to improve population security in and around Dat Do district and the Long Hai hills. The relative success of this effort demonstrated the validity of population security as an operational concept: just as had been the case after the construction of the Dat Do minefield in 1967, the Front faced a logistical crisis brought on by their inability to access villages. The drop in violence also allowed government control to be restored and led to a growing confidence among villagers towards the government – exactly how pacification was supposed to work.

However, security would once again decline after 1ATF ended pacification support operations in September 1969. The failure of 1ATF to remain in close support of pacification for an extended period showed both the limits of 'one war' as a concept and the ongoing, long-term problem facing pacification. The province's RF/PF proved unable to maintain an adequate level of security around populated areas, just as the Phoenix program proved unable to seriously undermine the Front's political infrastructure. This underperformance was a problem that Vietnamisation was supposed to solve. Yet over the course of 1969, advisers would argue (as they had in 1968) that the biggest problem facing the RVNAF was not a lack of training or supplies – although these were problems – but rather a lack of adequate leaders and endemic corruption. These were problems that needed to be fixed but that were ultimately out of the reach of advisers within Phuoc Tuy.

General Abrams assumed command of MACV on 1 July, 1968. He presented an immediate contrast to his predecessor. Whereas Westmoreland had cultivated an 'aura of spit-and-polish formalism', Abrams had a more informal appearance that was in keeping with his reputation as an aggressive, hard-driving armour officer.[552] Abrams also immediately began talking about the war in a different way to Westmoreland:

[552] Jeffrey Clarke, *Advice and Support: The Final Years, 1965–1973*, Center of Military History, Washington, D.C., 1988, p. 361.

> The enemy's operational pattern is his understanding that this is just one, repeat one, war…He knows there's no such thing as a war of big battalions, a war of pacification or a war of territorial security. Friendly forces have got to recognise and understand the one war concept and carry the battle to the enemy, simultaneously, in all areas of conflict.[553]

Abrams reinforced the perception that he saw the war differently when, in September 1968, he abolished the division of responsibilities between RVNAF and FWMAF that had existed since 1966–67. Where previously FWMAF units were expected to prioritise the destruction of 'main force' Communist units and RVNAF were assigned to pacification or territorial security, now all units were expected to give priority to all missions.[554] The implication was that pacification, formerly considered a secondary mission for both Free World and ARVN commanders, would now, in theory at least, be given equal billing.

In Brigadier C.M.I. 'Sandy' Pearson, 1ATF possessed a commander well equipped to execute this new strategy. Pearson was a smart, energetic officer who had been decorated for bravery in the South Pacific and had a background in military intelligence. He also took a keen interest in pacification, and made an immediate start on the problem with province authorities, as illustrated in the October 1968 province report:

> The new Commander, Brigadier C. Pearson, has adopted a completely different attitude toward the Vietnamese Province Officials and the Pacification problem than that of his two predecessors. He is already convinced of the importance of gaining the populace to support of GVN, by providing territorial security and eliminating the VC military and political threat. Despite the fact that he has been assigned only three weeks, he has organized his forces to bring maximum effort to bear on the improvement of local security, training of GVN military units and paramilitary elements targeted on VCI. He has cooperated with the senior US and GVN officials in a plan for involving Task Force [sic] in planning and executing fully integrated combined military, paramilitary, psychological and civil operations at District and Province level, giving this effort second priority after his primary mission of destroying VC main force units within his TAOR.[555]

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[553] Sorley, *A Better War*, p. 18.
[554] Clarke, *Advice and Support*, p. 362.
[555] William F. Mulcahy, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy Province – Period Ending 31 October 1968', 31 October 1968, p. 1; Province Reports 1968 (1), Box 1575, A1 731, RG 0472, NARA.

The last point is key, however. For all his interest in pacification, Pearson still viewed the primary mission of 1ATF as the destruction of Communist main force units.

Pearson was concerned that under Brigadier Hughes 1ATF had ceased to function to a coherent plan; operations were instead mounted on a short-term basis in response to the latest Communist activity. Consequently, he directed his staff to create a long-term scheme to guide Task Force operations. As Pearson recalled in 1972:

> On arrival in September 68 I sat down with the staff and we did an appreciation of what the various tasks were and how to devise a plan. It was quite clear that the two major tasks were to operate against the main force units and/or to conduct pacification operations. We did not have the strength to do both so the plan was in September 68, to conduct operations against main force units, which at the time was only 275 Regiment, until about Christmas. This gave us about four months in which we hoped we could eliminate 275, or at least see him off the battlefield so that we could turn our major efforts then to pacification.[556]

The plan itself emphasised that operations against main force units were 'the primary task', in that '[o]perations will be pursued constantly to seek out and destroy these forces. While the Task Force is operating in this Province at least one and generally two battalion groups will be deployed at all times on this task.'[557] Pearson had initially anticipated returning to pacification tasks by January 1969. However, as had been the case a year previously, in January the Task Force was diverted by II Field Force Vietnam to operations in the Long Binh-Bien Hoa area that aimed to disrupt another anticipated Communist Tet Offensive. It was therefore not until April 1969 that the Task Force returned to central Phuoc Tuy. Thus for the first five months of command Pearson had been concerned with operations against main force units rather than pacification.[558]

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[556] Pearson formally assumed command of 1ATF on 20 October 1968. However, when the interviewer suggests the events described in the above quote happened in October, Pearson says it was in September. Transcript of interview with MAJGEN C.M.I. Pearson by LTCOL R.F. Morrison, Canberra, 7 April 1972, p. 6; 2 AWM107.
[557] '1ATF Outline Plan – 1968/69', p. 1; R798/4/3 AWM103.
[558] For a description of 1ATF operations during this period see McNeill and Ekins, *Fighting to the Finish,* pp. 82–120.

These operations in Long Binh-Bien Hoa showed how Abrams' 'one war' concept 'differed from Westmoreland's activities more in emphasis than in substance'.[559] Both Westmoreland and Abrams recognised the basic truth that if pacification were to succeed, Communist main force units needed to be kept away from populated areas. Therefore, constant pressure needed to be applied on enemy base areas and units to keep them off balance and incapable of mounting large-scale attacks. This was as true in Phuoc Tuy as everywhere else in the RVN. As Brigadier Pearson wrote in late 1969, 'it would be disastrous to pacify the Province and then find 5 Div in a position to take it over militarily, even for a short period'.[560] Pearson's comment was undoubtedly influenced by the events of June 5–7 1969, when a battalion of the 33d PAVN Regiment occupied the village of Binh Ba in Phuoc Tuy. It took several days of fighting by a company of 5RAR with heavy armour support to drive the Communist regulars out of the village, destroying many houses in the process.[561] Although the battle did not have a major effect on pacification outside the confines of Binh Ba itself, it once again demonstrated the threat posed by main force units to populated areas. Right up until the withdrawal of the Task Force in late 1971, Australian commanders would be forced to strike a balance between operating in direct support of pacification and trying to counter the threat posed by the large PLAF and PAVN units lurking in the base areas on the fringes of the province. Abrams' 'one war' concept did not change this basic operational reality.

Coinciding with the announcement of 'one war' and 1ATF's absence from the populated areas of the province was a change in wider US pacification policy. Since the end of February's Tet Offensive DEPCORDS Robert Komer had been pushing for the South Vietnamese to mount a 'political-pacification' offensive in the countryside that would take advantage of the heavy losses suffered by the Front. President Thieu, deeply shaken by the Communist onslaught, demurred, preferring to keep South Vietnamese forces in a defensive

[559] Birtle, *US Army Counterinsurgency,* p. 367.
[560] 'Pacification – Phuoc Tuy Province. Comments by Comd 1 ATF', undated; D/4/8 AWM257. Although undated, events described in the document make it clear it was written in late 1969.
[561] For a detailed description of the Battle of Binh Ba, see McNeill and Ekins, *Fighting to the Finish,* pp. 210–226.

shield around urban areas. Komer was not easily dissuaded, however. The decision of his patron Lyndon Johnson not to recontest the Presidency and the opening of negotiations in Paris spurred him on. Within CORDS, Komer, his new CIA deputy William Colby and their staff worked on the concept. In a briefing to General Abrams on 20 September, Colby outlined the basic idea: a rapid offensive in which South Vietnamese forces were pushed out into the countryside in order to bring 90 percent of the population under government control prior to an anticipated ceasefire in early 1969. Abrams assented.[562]

Thieu remained hard to convince, favouring a traditional 'oil spot' methodology of gradual consolidation rather than the 'fast and thin' model advocated by Komer and Colby, but Komer refused to be put off. He presented a compromise: a three-month intensive campaign that would bring 1,000 currently contested hamlets under government control. After the campaign finished, consolidation could begin. When the plan gained support from the Joint General Staff, Thieu had little choice but to agree. The intensive effort – known as the Accelerated Pacification Campaign (APC) in English and the 'Le Loi' campaign in Vietnamese – would begin on 1 November. It was Komer's last victory in Vietnam; on 28 October he was appointed by Johnson, in one of his last acts as President, as US ambassador to Turkey.[563]

It was an appropriate coincidence that Komer left Vietnam on the eve of the the launch of the APC. As Johnson's 'pacification czar' he had been an enthusiastic advocate of Revolutionary Development, with its vision of Communist-style cadre building political allegiance for the government. But by late 1968 Komer had gone sour on the idea, describing Revolutionary Development as a political force as 'baloney' in one memo.[564] As he would admit in 1969, 'the black pajama teams were sexy … it over-influenced me in the early period too'.[565] As Thomas Ahern has argued:

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[562] Hunt, *Pacification*, p. 155.
[563] Jones, *Blowtorch* p. 206.
[564] Randall B. Woods, *Shadow Warrior: William Egan Colby and the CIA,* Basic Books, New York, 2013, p. 299.
[565] Komer, *Organisation and Management of the 'New Model' Pacification Program,* p. 135.

> the APC reinforced the decline of pacification's political dimension … An effort to pacify 1,000 hamlets in ninety days essentially abandoned the painstaking RDC approach aimed at demonstrating GVN benevolence and attracting active peasant loyalty.[566]

Yet as the performance of the RD cadre in Phuoc Tuy demonstrated, it is questionable whether this 'political dimension' ever existed in practice. In a sense the APC did not radically change the approach to pacification so much as officially normalise an existing practice that relied on military-driven territorial security. The building of loyalty could only come after the creation of this security.

Phuoc Tuy contained 28 of the 1,000 hamlets nominated by Komer for the APC. Of these 28 hamlets, 17 were in villages that had been occupied during the February and August offensives – Long Dien, Dat Do, An Nhut and An Ngai – while another five were in Duc Thanh district, which remained insecure. Although the orders for the campaign contained some lip service to 'exert[ing] maximum effort to gain the people's support', it made clear that the overall aim was to re-establish 'the administration of hamlet and villages in the contested areas', partly in order to give the RVN greater bargaining power in Paris. This was to be accomplished through the creation of 'real security', the elimination of VCI, the creation of the People's Self Defence Force (a village militia), the restoration of hamlet governments, and 'limited development to satisfy the urgent needs of the populace'.[567] Advisers were not optimistic entering the campaign. 'The quality of the planning for the "Le Loi" campaign is so poor, and the plan so general,' wrote Acting PSA William Mulcahy, 'that there is bound to be a reaction from III Corps.'[568] Expectations were confounded, however. 'Despite a lack of coordinated planning and a relatively late start,' Mulcahy conceded in November, 'the Le Loi Special Pacification Campaign has produced

[566] Ahern, *Vietnam Declassified,* pp. 301–302.
[567] LTCOL Nguyen Ba Truoc, Pacification Plan 'Le Loi', 9 November 1968; R176/1/56 AWM98.
[568] Mulcahy, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy Province', 31 October 1968, p. 1; Province Reports 1968 (1), Box 1575, A1 731, RG 0472, NARA.

immediate results.'[569] By the close of the APC in January, 26 of the 28 target hamlets were considered secure.[570]

More accurately, 26 out of 28 hamlets had been upgraded from 'D' to 'C' according to the HES. Another product of the age of systems analysis, the HES was an attempt to measure progress in pacification. Hamlets were rated in one of six categories – A, B, C, D, E or V. A, B, and C were considered to be secure to varying degrees, D, and E hamlets were contested and V villages were Communist-controlled. To determine which category a hamlet fell into, advisers would give a letter rating in six categories (VC military activity, subversion and political activity, capabilities of friendly forces, administration/friendly government activity, health, education and welfare, and economic development), each with three questions. A hamlet thus had 18 indicators, each individually rated and then averaged out by computer. This process occurred monthly.[571]

Much like body count figures, HES became a controversial example of MACV's attempts to quantify an extremely complex process. The cloak of statistical legitimacy partially obscured the fact that the reports relied on advisers 'interpret[ing] local conditions in the light of arbitrarily set standards'.[572] As Gregory Daddis has argued, HES also suffered from other significant drawbacks. The six criteria advisers examined ultimately measured the progress of CORDS-advised programs rather than progress towards the ultimate goal of those programs – allegiance to the government in Saigon. Whether or not advisers would produce accurate data even in the context of these standards also remained open to question. Few advisers spoke Vietnamese and they were culturally removed from those they were advising. As with body counts, advisers were also under pressure to produce positive news – or at least not acknowledge a regression. The end result was an advisory effort that, 'ideologically and culturally unequipped to manage revolutionary

[569] William F. Mulcahy, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy Province – Period Ending 30 November 1968', 30 November 1968, p. 1; Province Reports 1968 (1), Box 1575, A1 731, RG 0472, NARA.
[570] COL John T. Joseph (Ret), 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy Province – Period Ending 31 January 1969', 31 January 1969, p. 1; Province Reports 1969, Box 1576, A1 731, RG 0472, NARA.
[571] Hunt, *Pacification*, p. 95.
[572] Hunt, *Pacification*, p. 95.

development', increasingly turned to statistics as way of understanding the war.[573]

The extent to which advisers' perceptions of the progress of pacification in Phuoc Tuy came to be influenced by the statistics they collected is open to question. Most of the Province Senior Advisers who served in the province were prepared to offer critical opinions divorced from measurements such as HES. Nonetheless, monthly province and district reports were often dominated by the reporting of figures – VCI neutralised, operations conducted, enemy-initiated incidents, HES scores, officials trained and piastres spent – often with only minimal context provided. In contrast, Australian reports tended to take a more wary view of the data. Captain Jack Leggett, who served as an adviser in Phuoc Tuy in 1967, stated in a postwar interview that:

> We would put a [RD] team into a hamlet for a certain time and they would go through a number of programmes – and at the end of that time if the hamlet fulfilled certain criteria the Americans would classify it as 'pacified' and the team would move on to another hamlet. Of course three nights later the hamlet chief or one of the policemen would be assassinated but as far as the computer in Saigon was concerned that was another village pacified.[574]

Brigadier Pearson wrote in the middle of 1969 that while it looked likely the province would achieve many of its statistical goals, 'whether the targets being reached have a real effect on pacification is a different matter'.[575] In line with Australian doctrine, Pearson believed that pacification progress could only be judged, rather than measured, by things such as the voluntary assistance given to friendly forces by local villagers. Perhaps the best expression of Australian scepticism towards CORDS metrics came from an unknown staff officer who scribbled 'this month's fairy story' on the Task Force's copy of the October 1968 PSA report.[576]

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[573] Daddis, *No Sure Victory*, pp. 119–120, pp. 121–22.
[574] LTCOL J.A. Legget, *Interview,* 26 October 1978, quoted in McNeill, *The Team,* pp. 390–391.
[575] 'Pacification – Phuoc Tuy Province. Comments by Comd 1 ATF', undated; D/4/8 AWM257.
[576] The original annotated copy of the report is in R176/1/31/1 AWM98. Various photocopies of the report, complete with annotation, survive throughout the Australian archives.

The Accelerated Pacification Campaign within Phuoc Tuy was a study in the limitations of HES as a tool for measuring pacification progress, justifying in part Australian scepticism. As advisers were quick to stress, the improvements in HES-measured security in the relevant hamlets came from a combination of 'the deployment of RF/PF platoons in the target hamlets and … the extremely low level of VC military activity in most areas of the Province'. Yet these improvements could not yet be considered permanent: 'If the RF/PF were to be removed either by GVN or by VC military action, these hamlets would instantly revert to their former security status, or lower.'[577] There was, in other words, a fine line between a secure 'C' and contested 'D' hamlet, and the category a particular hamlet fell into rested to an extent on the activity of the Front, rather than the government. While HES was undoubtedly useful in measuring medium or long-term trends, the labelling of hamlets as 'secure' on the basis of a few months data and an arbitrary rating system was misleading.

This conclusion was reinforced by the uneven progress in achieving the Accelerated Pacification Campaign's other major goals in Phuoc Tuy. These goals – notably the restoration of functioning hamlet administrations, the creation of People's Self-Defence Force detachments and the destruction of Front infrastructure – amounted to a concerted effort to consolidate government control over targeted hamlets. Just as the Front had used violence to isolate the government from the people between 1960 and 1965 and to create a space in which its own political program could work, so too the RVN and advisers hoped to use the Phoenix program to destroy the VCI within villages, restore the government within hamlets, and protect this restored government bureaucracy with PSDF detachments. This program was driven by a growing realisation among advisers and Vietnamese authorities of the need to close the gap between the people and the government at local level. 'In a fundamental sense, the people were outside the system, which was nearly a closed corporate entity,' wrote Stephen B. Young, who served as the head of

[577] Mulcahy, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy Province – Period Ending 30 November 1968', 30 November 1968, p. 1; Province Reports 1968 (1), Box 1575, A1 731, RG 0472, NARA.

CORDS' Local Government Branch between 1969 and 1970.[578] By rebuilding government bureaucracy within hamlets and keeping it intact, CORDS and Vietnamese authorities hoped to reopen the government to the people.

The APC in Phuoc Tuy succeeded in at least restoring this government bureaucracy to the hamlets. By the end of November, all 28 hamlets targeted in the APC had had government officials appointed, and by the end of the campaign in January 1969, 17 of 22 villages in the province had elected representative councils, with the remaining five scheduled to hold elections in April.[579] The effort to remove the Communist competition of these new officials was less effective, however. By the end of November 1968, just six of the 126 VCI identified within the 28 APC hamlets had been neutralised.[580] This failure reflected the continued weakness of the Phoenix program, which advisers described as 'the greatest problem in Phuoc Tuy'.[581] Although a number of important individual VCI were killed or captured within the province over the remainder of the campaign in December 1968 and January 1969, advisers stressed that these neutralisations had been the product of routine military or police operations, not those of Phoenix. Over the course of the APC, and throughout the entire province, just twenty VCI neutralisations were credited to Phoenix.[582] So poor was the program's performance that in November 1968 PSA Mulcahy insisted 'that accommodation [with the Front] definitely exists and that enemy penetration into key GVN positions in a distinct possibility'.[583]

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[578] Stephen B. Young, 'Power Towards the People: Local Development in Vietnam, 1968–71' in John C. Donnell and Charles A. Joiner (eds), *Electoral Politics in South Vietnam,* Lexington Books, Lexington, 1974, p. 81.
[579] Mulcahy, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy Province – Period Ending 30 November 1968', 30 November 1968, p. 3; Province Reports 1968 (1), Box 1575, A1 731, RG 0472, NARA; Joseph, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy Province', 31 January 1969, p. 2; Province Reports 1969, Box 1576, A1 731, RG 0472, NARA.
[580] Mulcahy, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy Province – Period Ending 30 November 1968', 30 November 1968, p. 1; Province Reports 1968 (1), Box 1575, A1 731, RG 0472, NARA.
[581] Mulcahy, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy Province – Period Ending 30 November 1968', 30 November 1968, p. 2; Province Reports 1968 (1), Box 1575, A1 731, RG 0472, NARA.
[582] Evan Parker, 'Phoenix/Phung Hoang background on Phuoc Tuy Province', 11 March 1969, p. 1; 201/1/15 PART 1 A4531, NAA. NAA.
[583] Mulcahy, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy Province – Period Ending 30 November 1968', 30 November 1968, p. 2; Province Reports 1968 (1), Box 1575, A1 731, RG 0472, NARA.

Whatever the case, the failure to wear down the Front infrastructure further showed that the declaration of hamlets as secure at the end of the APC was premature. Despite the increases in HES rating, advisers noted in January that infiltrations by platoon-sized Front elements continued 'almost nightly' into Long Dien, location of seven of the 28 target hamlets.[584] Not only did cadre infiltrating into hamlets continue to spread propaganda and function as an alternative political force, they posed a direct physical threat to the newly restored government. On the night of 5–6 December 1968 a Front squad entered Ap Suoi Nghe (one of the 28 targeted hamlets) and attempted to assassinate the hamlet chief. Although the chief evaded his attackers, the squad succeeded in killing a former *Hoi Chanh* and abducting two other hamlet residents.[585] At roughly the same time in nearby Duc Trung (also in Duc Thanh district and also an APC hamlet), a Front squad abducted and killed the assistant hamlet chief.[586]

In both cases advisers believed the assassins had been assisted in their tasks by hamlet residents and in both cases the RF/PF tasked with preventing Front infiltrations failed to make contact. Both men also suffered graphic injuries and their bodies were dumped in the middle of roads, ensuring their grisly fates reached a wide audience. The case of Nguyen Toi, the man murdered in Ap Suoi Nghe, is particularly telling. A former Front cadre who had rallied to the government, Toi had been elected deputy hamlet chief of Suoi Nghe but immediately asked the province chief to remove him from the position, a request that was granted. Toi was murdered despite not taking office. A note pinned to his door made the Front's message clear: 'All activities helping the Enemy will be repressed severely.'[587] Toi's reluctance to take office was understandable: Suoi Nghe's original hamlet chief and his deputy had been

[584] Joseph, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy Province', 31 January 1969, p. 1; Province Reports 1969, Box 1576, A1 731, RG 0472, NARA.
[585] LT W.L. Kerr, 'VC Activities Suoi Nghe Night 5–6 Dec 68', 12 December 1968, p. 1; Province Report 1968, Box 1576, A1 731, RG 0472, NARA.
[586] MAJ Kenneth E. Knight to Province Senior Adviser, 'Assassination of Duc Trung Asst Hamlet Chief', 15 December 1968, p. 1; Province Report 1968, Box 1576, A1 731, RG 0472, NARA.
[587] 'Translation of note pinned to door of K3 after occupant was assassinated night 5/6 Dec 68', Annex A to Kerr, 'VC Activities Suoi Nghe Night 5-6 Dec 68', 12 December 1968, p. 1; Province Report 1968, Box 1576, A1 731, RG 0472, NARA.

assassinated in February, and their successors were killed by the Front in August. The brutal and public nature of Toi's death and the propaganda distributed afterwards made it clear to all residents that working in the hamlet administration carried a high risk, and showed why both population security and the destruction of the VCI were so critical to the success of pacification.

The other major component of this effort to solidify government control of the targeted hamlets was the creation of a hamlet militia, known as the People's Self-Defence Force (PSDF). Thomas Ahern notes that for many Americans 'the acid test of pacification was still the presence of an effective volunteer hamlet militia'.[588] William Colby, the CIA officer who succeeded Komer as head of CORDS in November 1968, was the most forceful advocate of this viewpoint. Colby argued that while militia could not be expected to fight PLAF or PAVN troops, they would pose a threat to the lightly armed cadre who entered villages at night to collect tax, spread propaganda – and assassinate officials. For Colby, however, the real value of the PSDF lay elsewhere. By joining the militia, a villager committed to the government; and by giving this man (or woman) the means to defend himself in the form of a weapon, the government committed to the villager.[589] The PSDF thus represented, in the eyes of American advisers, a direct and effective way of binding the population to the government.

As was so often the case, Saigon did not share the romantic pacification vision of its senior partner.[590] While the historic distrust of arming the peasantry out of fear of coups had faded, the government remained understandably concerned that giving weapons to undertrained teenage boys and middle-aged men was in effect handing them to the NLF. This concern held sway in Phuoc Tuy at first. Advisers urged a rethink on the basis that, in light of the government's obvious distrust of its own citizens, it was 'understandable that the people reciprocate by witholding their support'.[591] This appeared to have some effect and by the end of January, 1161 weapons had been issued to

[588] Ahern, *Vietnam Declassified,* p. 295.
[589] William Colby, *Lost Victory,* Contemporary Books, New York, 1989, pp. 241–243.
[590] Colby, *Lost Victory,* p. 242.
[591] Mulcahy, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy Province', 30 November 1968, p. 1; Province Reports 1968 (1), Box 1575, A1 731, RG 0472, NARA.

the PSDF province-wide.[592] Yet the implication in these figures that the province now had 1161 effective PSDF members showed once again the way in which apparently straightforward metrics could be deceptive. The number of weapons distributed was not a measure of either the effectiveness of the PSDF as a security force or of its success in building allegiance towards the government. As will be explored in detail in the next chapter, serious doubts emerged about the PSDF over the course of 1970.

Events in My Xuan, one of the six hamlets in Long Le district included in the APC, also revealed some of the limitations of the campaign's fast-and-thin approach. The lone hamlet of Phu My village, My Xuan was located on Route 15 near the border with Bien Hoa province. Nestled between the mangrove swamps of the Rung Sat Special Zone and the jungle of the Nui Thi Vai, My Xuan lacked the paddy fields of the hamlets in the centre of the province. As a result the inhabitants relied on the more economically marginal industries of woodcutting and charcoal burning, venturing into the surrounding jungle to carry out their work. In late 1968 the surrounding area became part of 1ATF's tactical area of responsibility (TAOR). Although villagers were warned about the danger of straying too far into the jungle, many continued to enter, and on 22 December six woodcutters were killed by A Sqn 3CAV in an ambush approximately two kilometres northeast of My Xuan.[593]

The deaths showed how the prioritisation of security over development, however understandable, could have unintended and harmful consequences for pacification. The local survey team sent to investigate the incident stressed in their report that the Australians had been acting within their own rules of engagement and that the villagers had been told repeatedly of the new TAOR. Many of the residents interviewed by the team admitted they knew of the restrictions but were compelled by economic circumstance to enter these areas anyway – 'a hungry dog does not fear the stick', as the report put it. Others

[592] Joseph, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy Province', 31 January 1969, p. 2; Province Reports 1969, Box 1576, A1 731, RG 0472, NARA.
[593] Local Survey Detatchment Report, 'The Unsuccesful Pacification Campaign in My Xuan Hamlet, Phuoc Tuy, January 1969', 15 July 1969, p. 2; R569/1/130 AWM98.

moved away, with the hamlet population dropping from approximately 2,000 to 1,117 after the emplacement of the restrictions. Many villagers increasingly came to resent a policy that they perceived as harming rather than protecting them. If political allegiance to the government was to be built in My Xuan the villagers' livelihood needed to be enhanced, not harmed, by pacification – a point explicitly made to the survey team by a quarter of those they interviewed.[594]

Circumstances in My Xuan also brought into question the role of local government. As noted above, one of the objectives of the Accelerated Pacification Campaign was to re-establish government bureaucracy in contested hamlets – in part as a way of gaining leverage at the Paris Peace Talks but also because of a belief that re-establishing contact between villagers and the government was a critical step in the pacification process. The survey team reported that the residents already had a friendly relationship with local government officials, referring to them as 'uncle', and the local Regional Forces company:

> A great many people said that the local government and the village security force are kind, for nothing regrettable occurred yet. But a few respondents commented that the RF Co. charged with security in their area and the local government certainly have had a good understanding of the local people's life and know who are waverers, pro-GVN or pro-Communists, and they would surely not tolerate pro-Communists; however, the district security personnel just arrest anyone they want to without notifying the RF post and the local government so that the detainees relatives may know where they are held and they may give them food or to feed them.[595]

The juxtaposition of the local government presence doing 'nothing regrettable' with district officials arresting people is telling. My Xuan was isolated from government-controlled areas and sat in the middle of a corridor that linked the Rung Sat Special Zone with Front base areas such as the Nui Dinhs and Hat Dich. In the context of a comparatively strong Front presence and a weak government one, it was perhaps unsurprising that villagers were more interested in a government that came to accommodations with the local Front than one which

[594] LSDR, 'My Xuan Hamlet', p. 3.
[595] LSDR, 'My Xuan Hamlet', p. 3.

aggressively pursued them. The events in My Xuan were an example that again shows the multiple loyalties and interests of the population – suggesting that an effort to shift them firmly to the government side would take a significant amount of time.

Two months after the end of the APC, 1ATF returned to pacification tasks in Phuoc Tuy. This return is generally attributed to a directive issued on April 16 by the new commander of IIFFV, Lieutenant General Julian Ewell, which ordered Pearson to concentrate on pacification. In reality, as Ashley Ekins points out, Ewell's 'directive' was actually 'nothing more than a restatement of Abrams' guidelines, which Ewell issued to all major unit commanders at his commander's conference on 13 April'.[596] Ewell had certainly informally asked Pearson to 'to do whatever he can to get things straightened out', describing Phuoc Tuy as being 'in the disaster category'.[597] But given Pearson's stated intention to return to pacification operations by January, it seems likely that the influence of Ewell in the Task Force's shift to pacification is overstated; and in any case, while one of the Task Force's three battalions would always be on 'pacification' operations from May to mid-August, another was always deployed on operations against enemy main force units and base areas. As always, a balance had to be maintained.

As Ewell's comments on Phuoc Tuy being a 'disaster' suggest, the new emphasis on pacification by the Task Force coincided with continued concern within CORDS about Phuoc Tuy's progress. In late March Colonel R.M. Montague of CORDS wrote to subordinate Hank Cushing:

> Could you have your crew make an analysis of pacification progress in Phuoc Tuy over the past year using available indicators … We hope to make a case to show General Kheim or President Thieu how badly [sic] Phuoc Tuy really is. General Wetherill had concluded that based on his visits to all provinces that Phuoc Tuy is probably the poorest run of all.[598]

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[596] McNeill and Ekins, *Fighting to the Finish*, p. 132.
[597] 'Commander's Conference 4 May 1969', 6 May 1969, p. 3; R220/1/36 AWM103.
[598] COL R.M. Montague to Hank Cushing, 'Subject: Phuoc Tuy', 31 March 1969; 201/1/15 PART 2 A4531, NAA. NAA.

The subsequent report, by Lieutenant Colonel Keinarth and Captain Poirier, emphasised 'all is not rosy in Phuoc Tuy'. Despite being one of the smaller provinces in South Vietnam, Phuoc Tuy had the tenth highest ratio of population to 'assets' such as Territorial soldiers and police. The report stated that:

> The pacification results obtained in Phuoc Tuy should be in proportion to its available assets, [but] this has not come about…With its available resources and resultant achievements strong leadership should have produced results in proportion to the assets available.[599]

The findings of Keinarth and Poirer gave statistical weight to the observations made by members of Team 89 a year earlier about the importance of effective leadership in pacification.

This view was conveyed repeatedly to Australian and New Zealand diplomats in early 1969 both from within CORDS and by Australian advisers. The Australian embassy's First Secretary, M.J. McKeown, painted a melancholy picture to the Department of External Affairs in late April after discussions with Major M.D. Currie, the province's Australian Psyops adviser. McKeown wrote that the problem of poor leadership was widespread and widely acknowledged in Phuoc Tuy, but that an entrenched network of corruption and patronage often prevented underperforming officers and officials from being relieved: 'it is hazardous for the Province Chief to move against corrupt officials who have protectors in high places'.[600] In another conversation held just a fortnight later, McKeown was told by Colonel Montague of CORDS that it was the Province Chief who was the problem – but once again, removal was made impossible by the presence of powerful patrons.[601] What is particularly noteworthy about this set of correspondence is McKeown's failure to consider (in print at least) the long-

[599] LTCOL Keinarth and CAPT Poirer, 'Analysis of Pacification Progress in Phuoc Tuy Province', undated, p. 1; 201/1/15 PART 2 A4531, NAA. NAA.
[600] First Secretary M.J McKeown to The Secretary, Department of External Affairs, 'Phuoc Tuy Province – Security', 24 April 1969; 201/1/15 PART 1 A4531, NAA..
[601] First Secretary M.J. McKeown to The Secretary, Department of External Affairs, 'Phuoc Tuy Province – Pacification', 7 May 1969; 201/1/15 PART 1 A4531, NAA..

term ramifications of this system of entrenched, self-sustaining corruption and patronage on the course of pacification in Phuoc Tuy.

The emphasis on South Vietnamese leadership as Phuoc Tuy's central problem left open the question of how Pearson and 1ATF would fulfil Ewell's request to 'get things straightened out'. Pearson's operational concept was relatively simple. He wanted to address the continuing issue of Front penetration of Long Dien and Dat Do from the Long Hais while also beefing up the assistance given to province authorities in areas such as training and intelligence support. In his words:

> I didn't want a repetition of Operation whatever it was [PINNAROO] where we had a tremendous amount of casualties from mines and booby traps up in the Long Hais, and it is very difficult fighting. So I put a Fire Support Base down at the bottom of the Long Hais near the village of, south of Dat Do, between Dat Do and Long Hai village. I put a battalion headquarters with a Fire Support Base there and put companies operating around the foothills of the Long Hais and Dat Do and in the light green. I said we would stay there until we starved out the people from the Long Hais.[602]

In addition to heavy patrolling in and around the Long Hais, the battalion at Dat Do had a number of other tasks. 9RAR, the first battalion to be deployed into the district, was split into company groups to accomplish these tasks. While one company patrolled the allotted AO between Dat Do and the Long Hais, one was deployed to the Horseshoe base north of Dat Do village to conduct a training course for the 2/48 ARVN Regiment while another protected land clearing teams operating in the vicinty of the Long Hais. In addition, after elements of D445 occupied Dat Do on 15 May, one company was deployed to supervise the construction of a bunker system around the village and conduct patrolling and Acorn missions within the town.[603] This Dat Do deployment thus aimed not only to provide security in the short term but also to create the conditions in which security could be maintained in the long term. Operation REYNELLA commenced on 8 May; subsequent battalion rotations received their

[602] Interview of MAJGEN Pearson, 7 April 1972, p. 17; 2 AWM107.
[603] LTCOL A.L. Morrison, 'Combat After Action Reports, Op Reynella', undated, p. 3; 7/9/17 AWM95.

own names (ESSO, MUNDINGBURRA and NEPPABUNNA) and would run until the September.

Pearson's operational concept was a revival of Graham's idea of 'breaking the links' by quarantining the population from base areas with a barrier. But whereas Graham had felt compelled to build the Dat Do minefield to try to isolate the village and the Long Hais from Xuyen Moc, Pearson now had sufficient troops available to do it via a sustained patrolling program. There was a certain irony in this, for Graham's minefield proved to be the biggest threat to the Australian troops in and around Dat Do, rendering forlorn Pearson's hope that mine casualties could be reduced by operating on the fringes of the Long Hais rather than within them. Local Front units relentlessely mined around Task Force patrols, killing 20 and wounding 119 in the vicinity of the Long Hais between May and August – approximately 41 percent of Task Force casualties during this period.[604] Mines caused morale problems as well as casualties as frustration built among soldiers who had nothing to shoot back at. Repeated mining of bunkers under construction in Dat Do so infuriated the commander of 9RAR, Lieutenant Colonel Morrison, that he told a group of villagers that he would shoot some of them if any more of his soldiers were killed by mines.[605] The threat was not carried out, but that it was made at all demonstrates the impact of the mine threat on the Australians.

Despite the difficulties posed by mines, it was clear by late August the operations in and around Dat Do were succeeding in their basic aim of increasing security for the populace and starving the local NLF of supplies, recruits and intelligence. Both the Dat Do and D445 histories emphasise the problems created by Australian operations and the parallels with Graham's construction of the minefield in 1967. The Dat Do history notes:

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[604] These figures are based on data contained in Table 8.1, 'Details of mine incidents causing 1ATF casualties in Phuoc Tuy province, 1969', McNeill and Ekins, *Fighting to the Finish,* p. 249; Map 8.1, 'Location of mine incidents causing 1ATF casualties in Phuoc Tuy province, 1969', McNeill and Ekins, *Fighting to the Finish,* p. 248; and Table 2, '1ATF operations – monthly results, July 1967–December 1971', Appendix A, McNeill and Ekins, *Fighting to the Finish,* pp. 772–773.
[605] McNeill and Ekins, *Fighting to the Finish,* p. 165.

> The system of bunkers around the three villages in the Đất Đỏ area were a new tactic by the Australians – a change from their M16-E3 minefield and fence that had been rendered ineffective. A new difficulty had arisen: our liaison routes from the District base to the three Đất Đỏ villages had been severed. Food and material could not be brought out and moved to the base. From the middle of 1969, our cadre and soldiers in the base had no rice to eat, and were forced to eat jungle vegetables and yams instead of rice.[606]

This view is confirmed by documents captured by 1ATF at the time. One recorded that:

> On the night of 12 Jun 69 we tried to enter the village but the enemy had laid ambushes. No improvised mines could be laid because the enemy had cleared the area to Route 52. Rice has been ordered from Phuoc Thanh, but could not be collected because of ambushes.[607]

The inability to access rice was particularly important for units such as D445 or the district companies. Unlike larger units, these local units were expected to draw supplies from the populace rather than relying on the logistics networks that extended into Cambodia and Laos. Consequently, isolation from the populace created an immediate and serious logistics crisis for the Front in Phuoc Tuy – just as the barrier minefield had upon its completion in 1967.[608]

Yet just as the operations in Dat Do were starting to create this logistical crisis, they ceased. Lieutenant General Ewell, although still unimpressed with the state of pacification in Phuoc Tuy, believed the Australians would be better utilised returning to operations in depth against main force units and base areas. Ewell remained a true believer in the legitimacy of body count, and as the number of kills generated by pacification operations slackened so too did Ewell's interest in them. He viewed the war through a statistical and analytical prism, often discussing events in purely numerical terms:

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[606] Huong (ed), *The History of the Struggle,*, p. 39.
[607] MAJ P.F. de Cure, 'Enemy Situation in Phuoc Tuy Province 22 Jun 69 to 29 Jun 69', 1 July 1969, p. 2; 1/4/156 AWM95.
[608] Chamberlain, *The Viet Cong D445 Battalion*, pp. 65–66.

> When friendly initiated contacts go up and the enemy initiated contacts go down, as is the case this week, we're on the right track…Further, if you aren't getting at least one kill per company [per] day you're not in the ball game. We took 6,208 enemy out of the fight during April, which is pretty good for a quiet month. When we reach 9,000 per month we'll be getting on with the job. I realize that your mission may be dictated by policy and leaves you in a position where it's difficult to achieve much in the way of body count…but you can make a significant contribution.[609]

Ewell's last comment is revealing. His belief that units should be employed as they had been prior to 1968 appeared to clash with Abrams 'one war' strategy. '[I]n rejecting pacification,' Ashley Ekins argues 'he actually defied his senior commanders.'[610]

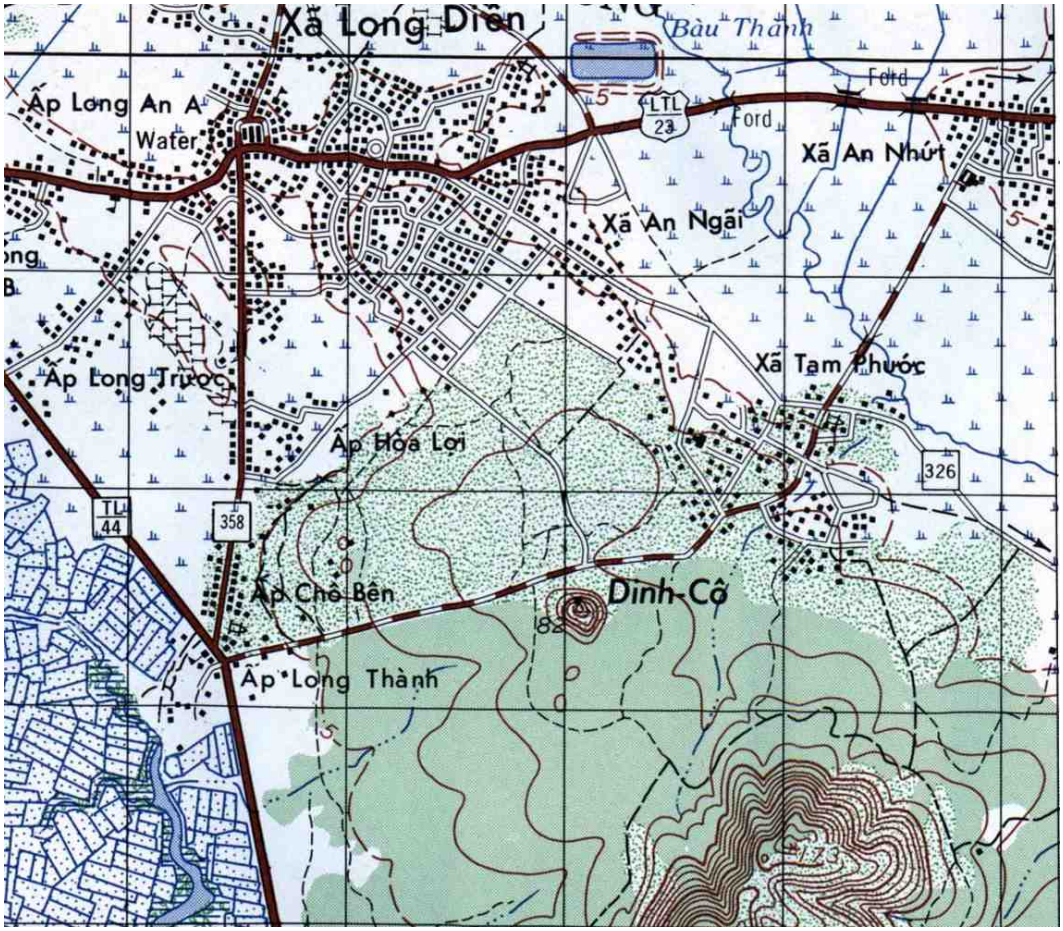
This contention is debatable. As Gregory Daddis has argued, senior US leadership including both Abrams and Secretary of Defence Melvin Laird saw the best way of reducing US casualties as firepower-heavy operations against Communist main force units and consequently they continued to use them heavily.[611] This continued interest was demonstrated by the 101st Airborne Division in May 1969, in an action that came colloquially to be known as the 'Battle of Hamburger Hill'. As part of a broader operation to clear the A Shau Valley, a key infiltration route from Laos into northern I Corps, a brigade of the 101st fought a bruising ten-day encounter to take control of a hill that dominated the entrance to the valley. The battle provoked a storm of controversy in the US, as it seemed to epitomise the allegedly pointless nature of the war in Vietnam – for, having suffered 47 deaths and over three hundred wounded in the battle, the paratroopers promptly abandoned the hill and moved further on into the valley.[612] Yet while Abrams cautioned his commanders to try and avoid such engagements in the future, he was basically pleased with the results of the operation.[613] The point of Abrams' 'one war' imagery, after all, was not to prioritise pacification support over operations directed against main force units but to impress upon subordinates the interconnected nature of all parts of the

[609] 'Commander's Conference 4 May 1969', 6 May 1969, pp. 1-2; R220/1/36 AWM103.
[610] McNeill and Ekins, *Fighting to the Finish*, p. 292.
[611] Daddis, *No Sure Victory*, p. 164.
[612] Sorley, *A Better War,* p. 141.
[613] Daddis, *No Surve Victory,* p. 168 and Sorley, *A Better War,* p. 142.

conflict. Ewell's decision to shift 1ATF away from operations in direct support of pacification thus could be seen as justified under the broad umbrella of 'one war', even if the American generals obsession with body count could not.

The Australian shift away from operations around Dat Do came at a critical time. Population security was not only important in a narrow military sense – the starving out of enemy units by isolating them from the populace – but also because it would allow the destruction of the Communist political apparatus within the villages and give the population the confidence to align itself with the government. There was some evidence that this was occurring in the villages around the Long Hais by late August. The village of Tam Phuoc [see Map 6] encroached upon the jungle that extended down from the northern tip of the Long Hais in Long Dien district. According to its village chief, Tam Phuoc and neighbouring villages like An Nhut and An Ngai had seen a long decline in population since 1965, thanks to the constant violence emanating from the Long Hais. This changed with the start of REYNELLA in May 1969. With improved security came better access by road, the construction of a windmill and a number of MEDCAPs. The placement of a mobile training team drawn from one of the Australian battalions with the local RF company stiffened them and led to further improvements in security. Communist infiltration into the village ceased, a PSDF section was formed and population gradually began to return.[614]

[614] 'Record of Conversation with Village Chief at Tam Phuoc YS4558 2100 hrs to 2400 hrs 21 Nov 69', 21 November 1969, p. 3; 201/1/15 PART 2 A4531, NAA. and 'Civic Action 1 Aust CA Unit Monthly Report – Jul 69 Phuoc Tuy Province and Vung Tau Municipality', 6 August 1969, p. 1; 17/1/27 AWM95.



Map 6: Tam Phuoc, c. 1968. This map shows the proximity of Tam Phuoc and Long Dien to the foothills of the Long Hais and emphasises once again how thick foliage ran into the villages, complicating the task of defenders. In the centre of the map is the abandoned Dinh Co monastery. Source: Author's Collection.

This situation did not survive the removal of 1ATF in mid-September, however, when Operation NEPPABUNNA finished. By late November, the village chief was telling 1ATF that:

> VC are now entering Tam Hoa hamlet almost every night to collect rice and spread propaganda. There are only 6 VCI from the village but they are very active, although they do not live in the village. The RF Coy no longer carry out effective operations. The Coy has no confidence in nor respect for the US MAT with them.[615]

The rapid regression of the local RF Coy is a key point in this statement. The improvement in security in Long Dien and Dat Do between May and September were the result of Australian actions. Even if Ewell had not removed the Task Force from the Dat Do deployment, at some point responsibility for population

[615] 'Record of Conversation with Village Chief at Tam Phuoc YS4558 2100 hrs to 2400 hrs 21 Nov 69', 21 November 1969, p. 3; 201/1/15 PART 2 A4531, NAA.

security would have had to be shouldered once again by the local RF/PF and ARVN units. Preparing them for this had been a central part of Pearson's plan since his arrival in the province. In the '1ATF Outline Plan' produced when Pearson arrived, the second objective behind the destruction of main force units was 'to assist SVN Government forces in the following priorities', which were the training of RF/PF and ARVN and providing assistance to 'Province/Sector and District/Sub-Sector authorities in the pacification programme in their areas'.[616] The effectiveness of these measures would determine whether or not the security situation would remain stable in Dat Do and Long Dien in the long term.

The emphasis on the training of local Vietnamese forces coincided with another public shift in US policy – 'Vietnamisation', announced by President Nixon in June 1969. As historian Jeffrey Clarke put it, 'Vietnamization had two distinct elements: first, the unilateral withdrawal of American troops … second, the assumption of greater military responsibilities by the South Vietnamese armed forces.'[617] Critically, the former was not in practice linked to the latter – that is, US withdrawals would continue regardless of whether or not Vietnamese forces could adequately replace them. In March 1969, Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird visited Vietnam. In a meeting with senior MACV leadership Laird 'emphasized that the American people expect the new Administration to bring the war to a satisfactory conclusion':

> The people will not be satisfied with less. A satisfactory conclusion, I emphasized, means to most Americans the eventual disengagement of American men from combat… Accordingly, I told our leaders in South Vietnam the key factor in sustaining the support of the American people is to find the means by which the burden of combat may promptly, and methodically, be shifted to the South Vietnamese.[618]

The idea of shifting the 'burden' (a curious term given that the RVNAF suffered higher casualties than US forces throughout the war) of combat to the Vietnamese was not new and had been pursued by the Johnson Administration

[616] '1ATF Outline Plan – 1968/69', p. 1; R798/4/3 AWM103.
[617] Clarke, *Advice and Support,* p. 341.
[618] Memorandum from Secretary of Defense Laird to President Nixon, 'Subject: Trip to Vietnam and CINCPAC, March 5–12, 1969', 13 March 1969, *FRUS 1969–1976,* VI: p. 110.

under the name 'de-Americanization'. But this policy, and existing military planning, had been guided by the belief that US withdrawals had to be governed by matching growth in South Vietnamese capability. As Laird's memo suggests this was not the case with Vietnamisation, where domestic political concerns always trumped military realities. Although efforts to upgrade Vietnamese capabilities were sincere, withdrawals were always going to continue regardless of the success or failure of this effort.[619]

In this sense 'Vietnamisation' did not really begin in Phuoc Tuy until June 1970, when the Australian government attempted to compensate for an announced drawdown in the strength of 1ATF with a promise of additional advisers and a training facility for local RVNAF. The training program instituted in mid-1969 was instead the product of efforts by MACV that dated back to mid-1967 to improve local Vietnamese forces. In October 1967 CORDS, having previously urged subordinate FWMAF units to 'seek out new methods for successful advisory approaches' outlined a new concept for the training of Vietnamese units.[620] Mobile Advisory Teams (MAT) were to be composed of a number of personnel from Free World units. They were to be assigned to individual Vietnamese units such as Regional Forces companies and were to live in their compounds, go on operations with them, and teach a syllabus centred around basic infantry tactics. 'MAT have proven to be the single best program for the improvement of RF/PF forces,' the message stated, and it requested that 1ATF provide 'liaison with and give necessary assistance to MATs' [sic] in Phuoc Tuy and Ham Tam district of neighbour Binh Tuy province.[621]

By this stage 1ATF was already experimenting with similar ideas. Since the arrival of the Task Force, a number of AATTV advisers had been deployed with 614 RF Company in Binh Ba, and were considered to have improved its

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[619] William Bundy, *A Tangled Web: the making of foreign policy in the Nixon presidency*, Hill and Wang, New York, 1998, p. 64; Clarke, *Advice and Support*, p. 341.
[620] 'JPG' to IIICTZ major headquarters, 'Security of RD teams', 12 August 1967, R569/1/30 AWM103.
[621] Message from CG II FFORCEV to subordinate formations, 'Support of MATS', 25 September 1968; R569/1/1/2 AWM305.

performance considerably.[622] Brigadier Graham resisted the idea of expanding this advisory presence in the province, however, arguing that it was beyond the resources of either the Task Force or the AATTV.[623] This attitude shifted with the arrival of Brigadier Hughes, however. On the same day the MAT concept was transmitted from CORDS to 1ATF, 1 Australian Reinforcement Unit began Operation VANIMO, the training of 3/48 ARVN Regiment. A team from the unit consisting of a commanding officer, an Australian interpreter and ten instructors conducted refresher training of company groups in basic infantry tactics. On the completion of VANIMO in November and with the approval of Brigadier Hughes, 1ARU raised a MAT, which was then assigned to 626 RF Coy in Ap Suoi Nghe. By the start of 1969, this unit had been joined by seven US MATs deployed in Phuoc Loi, Phu My, Phuoc Hoa, Long Son, An Ngai, Dong Nga Nam and Binh Ba.[624] Pearson was determined to supplement this effort because, as he put it, the local Vietnamese forces 'were bloody terrible'.[625] He revived the idea of the training of an ARVN battalion and also decided that the battalion on deployment into Dat Do would raise so-called 'mini-MATS' to deploy directly with local RF and PF units.

Underpinning the advisory effort both in Phuoc Tuy and nationwide was the belief that Vietnamese forces lacked skills, and that intensive training of the kind envisioned by Pearson would result in significant improvement.[626] One MAT reported that 'troops carried out all they knew with enthusiasm', but that 'it is just that they don't know [much]'.[627] MATs found that units were particularly poor at ambushing and patrolling. A 5RAR MAT deployed with an RF Company in Hoa Long found that ambushing parties routinley returned to their compounds before midnight. Not only did this mean they were unlikely to contact Front elements leaving the village in the early hours of the morning, it exposed the extremely poor light and noise discipline common among

[622] McNeill, *The Team*, p. 236.
[623] BRIG Graham to COMAFV, 'Advisory Teams in RF Posts', 28 June 1967; R569/1/30 AWM103.
[624] CORDS IICTZ/IIFFV to 1ATF, 'Location of MATS', 1 February 1969; R569/1/30 AWM103.
[625] Interview with MAJGEN Pearson, 7 April 1972, p. 19; 2 AWM107.
[626] Boylan, 'The Red Queen's Race', p. 1213
[627] 'Report MAT Hoa Long 4–8 Jun 69', Annex C to '5RAR Mini-MATS 4 Jun–9 Jun 69', 18 July 1969; 7/5/29 AWM95.

Territorial units. These were particularly significant problems given the demonstrated effectiveness of intensive ambushing and patrolling in restricting Front access to the villages.

Some of the deployed MATs in Dat Do believed they had had some success in raising the ability of the units they had trained: Territorial units became more professional, and they showed a greater willingness to leave their compounds and act aggressively against the enemy. Others, however, found that the problems within the Territorial forces could not be solved by training alone. The abysmal state of the Vietnamese logistics system meant that many compounds were inadequately protected by barrier materials such as barbed wire and soldiers often lacked basic equipment either because it had not been issued or because worn-out items had not been replaced. In some cases MATs addressed these shortages by drawing on supplies from Australian or American channels, but this left the basic problem of fixing the Vietnamese supply system.[628] There were also problems with the advisory effort. As Pearson acknowledged, Australian efforts were ad hoc and operated alongside the existing US MAT system.[629] Teams found that too little time was allocated to train each RF/PF unit, linguistic barriers were a significant obstacle, and that the tactical methods of US and Australian instructors differed. 'The overall effect of the MAT Team,' one officer wrote, 'would have been to create confusion amongst them with the time available and not being able to confirm what has been taught.'[630]

But the major problem facing the Territorials was the corruption and mediocre leadership outlined in the previous chapter. The Inspection Officer for MATs in the province, Captain J. E. Wieland, visited one company in Dat Do to find just five soldiers in the company compound, with the remainder absent. 'The coy commander was unable to explain their whereabouts,' Wieland reported, and 'their normal system of firing a burst of M16 fire into the air to

[628] CAPT J.E. Wieland (Inspection Officer, MATT) to PSA, 'Report for Period Sun 22 Jun 69–3 Jul 69', 5 July 1969, p. 2; R569/1/30 AWM103.
[629] Interview with MAJGEN Pearson, 7 April 1972, p. 20; 2 AWM107.
[630] 'B Coy MAT Team Hoa Long 609 RF Coy', Annex B to '5RAR Mini-MATS 4 Jun–9 Jun 69', 18 July 1969; 7/5/29 AWM95.

muster their soldiers produced negative results.'[631] Another MAT commander encountered a similar problem –his initial effort to muster the company 'proved difficult as nearly all of the compound were out shooting at the birds or on local leave.'[632] Wieland also discovered two instances within a two-week period in which RF units faked attacks on themselves – in one case as a pretext for destroying unit records revealing corrupt practices, and in another to hide the fact that an ambush had fallen asleep and had a rifle stolen by Viet Cong.[633] Even in units that showed more professionalism there were complaints of officers and quartermasters siphoning off supplies, leading to a fall in capability and morale.

Wieland felt that 'many of the commanders are totally incompetent' and that 'the majority of the soldiers don't really care about their duties and in many cases, a complete attitude of apathy seems to exist'. Despite this, he also believed 'that the soldiers themselves can be made as good as any soldier if they are properly trained, equipped and led, and if they are given their correct entitlements and privileges'.[634] While training was part of the issue, for significant change to occur the quality of leadership within the RVNAF would have to improve and the corruption significantly decline. These were issues that could not be solved by an external advisory presence. Wieland referred many of the individual incidents to an officer of the Vietnamese Military Security Service (MSS), but the problems appeared systemic. Although RF/PF units often improved under the tutelage of MAT teams, they were observed to regress rapidly once the MAT was removed. This suggested that, as was the case with leadership within the province administration, it would take long-term change within the Republic of Vietnam for the situation to improve. The obvious problem posed by Vietnamisation was whether or not sufficient time would be granted for that change to occur.

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[631] Wieland, 'Report for Period Sun 22 Jun 69–3 Jul 69', 5 July 1969, p. 3; R569/1/30 AWM103.
[632] 'B Coy MAT Team Hoa Long 609 RF Coy', Annex B to '5RAR Mini-MATS 4 Jun–9 Jun 69', 18 July 1969; 7/5/29 AWM95.
[633] Wieland (Inspection Officer, MATT) to PSA, 'Report for Period Sun 22 Jun 69–3 Jul 69', 5 July 1969, pp. 1-3; R569/1/30 AWM103.
[634] Wieland (Inspection Officer, MATT) to PSA, 'Report for Period Sun 22 Jun 69–3 Jul 69', 5 July 1969, p. 5; R569/1/30 AWM103.

The changes in policy made at a national level during the period covered in the chapter – the Accelerated Pacification Campaign, 'one war', and Vietnamisation – represented, in practice, an evolution rather than a revolution in pacification. The APC was a tacit acknowledgement of the failure of the RD cadre program and its vague calls for 'social revolution'. It acknowledged that, in practice, pacification already rested on the ability of the government to establish physical control of hamlets or villages and create a safe space in which the government presence could be rebuilt. 'One war' was a new slogan for an old idea that had long been understood by US and Vietnamese leadership: pacification and the 'big war' were intimately linked, and that success in one was not possible without success in the other. Finally while Vietnamisation was part of a significant shift in US grand strategy, as the Nixon Administration began to look for ways to disengage from Vietnam, it did not lead to a radical change of approach on the ground. Instead, it simply gave added impetus to existing efforts on the part of MACV to improve the performance of the RVNAF.

This refined version of pacification met with some success in Phuoc Tuy. The government was able to achieve many of its goals during the Accelerated Pacification Campaign, improving the security of most of the targeted hamlets and re-establishing and reinforcing administration within all of them. The subsequent operations in Dat Do district by 1ATF between May and August 1969 were also successful. By the time the Task Force was ordered out of Dat Do by Lieutenant General Ewell in August, the Front was facing a supply crisis that was the result of their inability to access the villages of the district. Moreover, there were signs that behind the shield created by the Australians, the government was successfully rebuilding its credibility with the people. This extended Dat Do deployment thus confirmed both the importance of population security to the success of pacification and the validity of 'breaking the links'.

However, this period also showed that, despite short-term success, pacification in Phuoc Tuy would have to overcome deeply rooted obstacles to succeed. As the Task Force's sudden redeployment in August showed, even in the short term the Australians could not be relied on to provide constant

security to the province's populated areas, while the performance of the province's Territorial units continued to be lacklustre. A key part of Vietnamisation was the provision of training for these units, and this began to be undertaken by both Australian and American advisory teams in 1969. While individual RF and PF units often improved after training, they also tended to regress once supervision was removed. As they had done in 1968, advisers blamed this primarily on the quality of leadership both within units and the province government as a whole – and as they had done in 1968, stopped short of following through this observation to its logical conclusion. Would the existing solution to the problem, of sacking underperforming individuals, be adequate in the long term? If the answer was no, the implications for both pacification and Vietnamisation were ominous. Over the course of 1970, however, pacification's future would rest on the shoulders of 1ATF.

Chapter 8. Déjà vu, All Over Again

September 1969–November 1970

The period covered in this chapter is defined by an arrival and a departure from Vietnam. In September 1969 Brigadier Pearson's tour as commander of 1ATF ended, and he returned to Australia. His replacement, Brigadier S.P. Weir, abandoned operations in support of pacification and returned the Task Force to hunting Communist main force units on the fringes of Phuoc Tuy. In the absence of the Task Force, security in Phuoc Tuy's populated areas plummeted as the Front mounted a sustained campaign against pacification. Weir's successor, Brigadier W.G. Henderson, moved the focus of operations back to pacification support when he assumed command of 1ATF in May 1970. For the next six months the Task Force achieved almost unprecedented success against the Front, denying them access to the province's populated areas and inducing a significant logistical crisis. However, although Henderson continued focusing on pacification support until February 1971, a significant milestone was reached in November 1970 when the 8th Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (8RAR) returned to Australia and was not replaced. Under domestic political pressure, the Australian government had begun its own program of gradual withdrawal from Vietnam, albeit without a definitive timetable. Although the remainder of the Task Force would not leave Phuoc Tuy for another 12 months, the departure of 8RAR was a clear indication that the Australians would not be present to assist pacification in Phuoc Tuy for much longer.

The arguments put forward in the first half of this chapter are largely a continuation of those discussed in the previous one. The events of the thirteen months between Weir's arrival as Task Force commander and the departure of 8RAR showed both how critical population security was to the success of pacification and how incapable the local RVNAF were of maintaining it in the

absence of 1ATF. This period also confirmed that the most effective way of hurting the Front was to create a barrier between the villages and the remote base areas – in other words, Graham's concept of 'breaking the links'. But where previous Task Force commanders such as Graham and Pearson had chosen to try to build permanent physical barriers, Brigadier Henderson used his infantry. The tactical technique of close-in ambushing proved much more effective than either the Dat Do minefield or the Dat Do bunkers at stopping the Front from entering populated areas. By November 1970, the Front faced a serious crisis of logistics and morale in Phuoc Tuy. The Task Force had, in other words, created a blueprint for the military defeat of the Front in the province.

The growing momentum of the South Vietnamese government's political and economic reforms amplified the importance of this increased security. For the first time, security was being provided not to preserve the old rural order but to protect a program that aimed to actively win the allegiance of the population. The political aspects of this program culminated in the Presidential and Lower House elections of 1971, and so will be discussed in the next chapter. However, the centrepiece of economic reform, President Thieu's 'Land to the Tiller' Act, passed into law in March 1970 and so pacification's economic aspects will be discussed in this chapter. The suite of economic measures enacted by Thieu's government – which included not only Land to the Tiller but also the introduction of high-yield rice strains and targeted funding under the Village Self-Development program – were important for two reasons. By providing a mechanism for farmers to escape tenancy, Land to the Tiller addressed one of the major grievances driving rural support for the Front throughout South Vietnam. Yet it and the economic programs mentioned above also represented the final act of the modernisation dream in South Vietnam – a concerted effort not merely to improve the economic status of the rural population but to transform them, from peasants locked in a traditional Asian past to consumers moving into a Western future. This chapter explores not only the success of economic reform in ending tenancy in Phuoc Tuy but also the broader social and political impact of these economic policies.

Brigadier S.P. 'Black Jack' Weir took command of 1ATF on 1 September 1969. His career neatly paralleled that of the army he served in – decorated for bravery as a platoon commander in New Guinea during the Second World War, he had later commanded a company in Korea and a battalion in Malaya. Postings as Deputy Director of the Directorate Military Operations and Plans and Acting Commander, 1st Division had then allowed him to stay abreast of developments in Vietnam.[635] As a result, Weir arrived in Phuoc Tuy with his own definite ideas about how 1ATF should operate:

> Well I think the Task Force, with its immense fire power and tremendous flexibility, had the job of hammering away at the enemy Main Force, and the enemy Local Force formed units, which were in fact 'big brother' to all the little guerrilla units that existed at every village and hamlet and in every district. I felt that our responsibility was to hammer away at 'big brother' and keep him away from the populated areas and therefore separating from, not only his support but denying the local guerrillas, and the support of the Main Force and the Local Force and thus cutting down their capability to be active. This in fact was my aim throughout, I kept hammering away at the main force as long as they were in the Province. [636]

Weir's conception of 1ATF's role is intriguing for a number of reasons. His description of the symbiotic relationship between the Communist main forces and the guerrillas operating in populated areas, and the need to keep the two separated, differed little from those provided by previous Task Force commanders such as Jackson, Graham and Pearson. Yet where these men had seen the denial of Front access to the populated areas of the province as the key to breaking up this relationship, Weir saw the role of the Task Force as 'hammering away' at main force units, wherever they were. The parallels with Westmoreland's thinking between 1966 and 1967 are striking, and emphasise how the decision to pursue main force units was not the product of ignorance about counterinsurgency but rather of disagreements on the appropriate use of Free World military units in a commonly accepted framework.

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[635] McNeill and Ekins, *Fighting to the Finish,* pp. 316–318.
[636] Transcript of interview of BRIG S.P. Weir by LTCOL R.F. Morison, Canberra, 13 July 1972, p. 11; 2 AWM107.

As a result of Weir's new operational concept, the Task Force spent the period between September 1969 and February 1970 operating in the Hat Dich, Xuyen Moc district and the Nui May Taos.[637] Weir was being a little disingenuous, however, when he suggested in 1972 that this move away from the province's populated areas was because the Front 'had in fact been, largely, driven out of that area and had gone to the jungle'.[638] In the same interview Weir admitted that 'I was always reluctant to get back into that populated area', and this was reflected in the Task Force's stubborn refusal to mount operations in Long Dien, Dat Do and Long Le districts even when D445 battalion was identified operating in these areas. It was not until February 1970, when a company of 8RAR temporarily guarding a quarry site in the foothills of the Long Hais accidentally 'found' D445, that the Task Force mounted a major operation (HAMMERSLEY) in the central populated area.[639]

Weir's reluctance to mount this kind of operation stemmed partly from his belief that 'the only way to upgrade the local Vietnamese forces was to make them take over some responsibility', although the previous failure of this sink-or-swim approach apparently escaped his notice.[640] The more convincing explanation for Weir's unwillingness to engage in population security was his desire to keep casualty rates in the Task Force low – and in particular to avoid the mine casualties that had dogged previous Task Force operations around the Long Hais. Prior to his departure for Vietnam, Weir said that the Chief of the General Staff, Lieutenant General Tom Daly, had made this point to him explicitly:

> The most significant thing, as far as the CGS was concerned, was that he said that I should be very careful indeed to keep the casualty figure down. He was alarmed about the high casualty rate, particularly the accident rate, and particularly the casualties we were receiving from mines, for one reason or another.[641]

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[637] For a description of these operations, see McNeill and Ekins, *Fighting to the Finish,* pp. 314–290.
[638] Interview with BRIG Weir, 13 July 1972, p. 6.
[639] For a description of HAMMERSLEY see Hall, *Combat Battalion,* pp. 47–57 and McNeill and Ekins, *Fighting to the Finish,* pp. 370–389.
[640] Interview with BRIG Weir, 13 July 1972, p. 6.
[641] Interview with BRIG Weir, 13 July 1972, p. 4.

The issue of casualties would clearly vex Weir for his time in command; he would again later admit that, in the lead up to the Australian Federal election on 25 October 1969, he had on his own initiative deliberately tried to keep casualties low by directing 'the forces at my disposal into areas where I knew we were not going to have significant contact'.[642]

Weir's arrival as Task Force commander coincided with a shift in Front strategy in Phuoc Tuy. After the heavy losses and abortive general uprisings of 1968, VWP leadership in Hanoi reluctantly returned to a strategy of 'talk-fight' and protracted struggle.[643] This shift in strategy was promulgated in COSVN Resolutions 9 and 14, issued in July and October 1969 respectively. The two resolutions outlined a program in which the Front was to focus on attacking the pacification program while rebuilding its military and political strength in the countryside.[644] According to *Dat Do,* Resolution 9 was examined by the Ba Long Province Committee at a meeting held between 30 August and 5 September.[645] As a result of the directions contained in the Resolution, the Committee directed that D445 Battalion move into the Long Dat district and, with the assistance of local forces, begin operations against the pacification program. The result of this was that just as Weir was shifting the focus of the Task Force to the fringes of Phuoc Tuy, one of the major Front units the Task Force was supposed to be hunting was returning to the province's central populated areas.

The Front's new anti-pacification focus saw a surge in fighting in the province's populated areas. During its monthly meeting on 10 October 1969 the Joint AFV-Embassy Pacification Committee 'noted with some concern that enemy initiated incidents had risen from 34 in August to 60 in September, and that the increased number of incidents had continued in October up to the date of the meeting'.[646] In particular, over the course of September and October

[642] Interview with BRIG Weir, 13 July 1972, p. 16.
[643] Nguyen, *Hanoi's War,* pp. 129–130.
[644] Hunt, *Pacification,* pp. 218–219.
[645] Huong (ed), *The History of the Struggle*, pp. 42–43.
[646] 'Joint AFV/Embassy Group Pacification Situation in Phuoc Tuy Province Report', 10 October 1969, p. 1; D/4/8 AWM257.

D445 and local guerrillas repeatedly attacked the bunker system built by 1ATF in May and June to guard Dat Do. By mid-October, the Front histories claim, 25 out of the 36 bunkers had been destroyed.[647] Both *D445* and *Dat Do* credit the destruction of the bunkers around Dat Do with ending the supply crisis that had existed in the Long Dat since May–June but in reality, the ending of Task Force operations in the area was almost certainly responsible.[648] The fact that four of the five major attacks against the bunker system by D445 during October came from within Dat Do gives some idea as to their effectiveness in the first place.[649] Far from serving as a stable base for an aggressive forward defence of patrolling and ambushing as originally intended, the bunkers reinforced the tendency of Territorial soldiers to stay put. PSA Martin S. Christie wrote caustically at the end of October that the destruction of the bunkers therefore 'accomplished what advice couldn't…the RF/PF have moved out of the bunkers and into ambush positions where they are no longer prime targets for B-40 rockets'.[650]

But the infiltrations continued, suggesting that these 'ambushes' remained just as ineffective as they had been earlier in 1969. In a letter to the province chief in mid-October Christie wrote of his 'concern [at] the sanctuary the enemy has in the Long Hai's [sic] and the ease in which they seem to move into Phuoc Hai, Hoi My, Phuoc Loi and the 3 villages in the Dat Do complex'.[651] In July 1970 the Long Dien district adviser estimated that each of the five hamlets of An Ngai received an average of between three and five infiltrations a month, and suggested this pattern had been going on for some time.[652] When interviewed in late November the village chief of Tam Phuoc described almost nightly infiltrations by Front cadre looking for supplies and spreading

[647] Huong (ed), *The History of the Struggle*, p. 44.
[648] Chamberlain, *The Viet Cong D445 Battalion*, p. 72; Huong (ed), *The History of the Struggle*, p. 44.
[649] MAJ Otto J. Thamasett, 'District Pacification Report – Phuoc Tuy Province – Dat Do District – Period Ending 31 Oct 69', 31 October 1969, p. 1; District Reports 1969, Box 1576, A1 731, RG 472, NARA.
[650] Martin S. Christie, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy Province – Period Ending 31 Oct 1969', 31 October 1969, p. 2; Province Report 1969, Box 1576, A1 731, RG 472, NARA.
[651] Martin S. Christie to LTCOL Nguyen Ba Truoc, 'Letter to Counterpart', 16 October 1968, p. 2; Letters to Counterpart 1969, Box 1576, A1 731, RG 472, NARA.
[652] MAJ Dale C. Gabriel, 'An Ngai Village', 25 July 1970, pp. 1–2; Village and Hamlet Administration 1970, Box 1580, A1 731, RG 472, NARA.

propaganda.[653] A typical 'infiltration' would see local cadre and guerrillas, escorted by around 25 members of D445, move into a village in the early evening. While the soldiers formed a perimeter, cadre would gather the inhabitants by moving door-to-door. When the villagers had been assembled, some cadre delivered a propaganda lecture while others collected supplies and taxes. One member of D445 captured in February 1970 during Operation HAMMERSLEY revealed he had undertaken three such missions, all without any government interference.[654]

As explained in the previous chapter, this kind of access to villages remained the basic precondition for the existence of the insurgency in Phuoc Tuy. At a minimum it allowed the insurgent forces to receive the supplies they needed to continue to function. A series of assessments of the province Chieu Hoi program in early 1970 noted the ease with which Front guerrillas and cadre in the Nui Dinh and Long Hai hill complexes could enter Hoa Long and the villages of Long Dien and Dat Do and access the food they held.[655] 'Until this source of food is denied them and ground operations are effective against them,' the report argued, 'few Hoi Chanhs are likely to rally'.[656] This is not to suggest that the Front was swimming in plenty in Phuoc Tuy during this period, and reports from both the Task Force and Team 89 stress that the simple act of gathering supplies remained the major preoccupation of many Front units. Yet that they were able to survive points to the critical role villages played in local Front logistics.

Perhaps more importantly, the ongoing access to villages allowed the Front to continue to challenge the pacification program, presenting itself in the process as a legitimate alternative to the government. Although attacks against

[653] 'Record of Conversation with Village Chief at Tam Phuoc YS4558 2100 hrs to 2400 hrs 21 Nov 69', 21 November 1969, p. 3; 201/1/15 PART 2 A4531, NAA..
[654] Martin S. Christie, 'Consolidated Vietnamese Communist Infrastructure Neutralization Report', 27 February 1970, p. 2; Monthly Neutralization Report 1970, Box 1585, A1 731, RG 472, NARA.
[655] 'Study of Long Le District Chieu Hoi Program', 31 March 1970, p. 1; Phung Hoang File 1970, Box 1586, A1 731, RG 472, NARA.
[656] 'Study of the Chieu Hoi Program in Long Dien District', 31 March 1970, p. 4; Phung Hoang File 1970, Box 1586, A1 731, RG 472, NARA.

government buildings and personnel did not occur with the same frequency as in 1967–68, the simple presence of the Front within villages night after night stood as a powerful deterrent to individuals willing to openly commit to the government. A common theme in opinion surveys undertaken by the government at the time was the reluctance of some villagers to engage in activities seen as pro-government, such as voting or even speaking to the survey teams themselves, for fear of retaliation.[657] Villagers had long memories; their communities had experienced the ebb and flow of guerrilla conflict before, first during the war against the French and again during the Diem era. The village chief of Tam Phuoc drew on this memory when, after acknowledging that the government currently had the upper hand, he predicted that if 1ATF were to withdraw the Front would regain control in three months.[658] This reluctance to be seen as pro-government for fear of the consequences, both immediate and future, posed obvious problems for a pacification program that was increasingly predicated on villagers engaging with government bureaucracy on a day-to-day basis.

This is not to say that the Front survived in the Long Dat, and Phuoc Tuy, solely through threats and coercion. Gauging the level of Front support was always difficult, but advisers continued to believe a significant minority of the population throughout the province was 'pro-VC'. Warrant Officer Ray Simpson, who served multiple tours with the AATTV across Vietnam and finished training PSDF in Phuoc Tuy, wrote bitterly to a friend in September 1970 that 'the so called government controlled villages, Hoa Long, Dak To and those near the Long Hais are infested with Charlie and his supporters (willing or forced)'.[659] However, Simpson, who studded the letter with gloomy predictions of inevitable defeat, was pessimistic even by Australian standards. Even in areas

[657] Pacification Research Report, 'Village Election in Phuoc Tuy, 22 March 1970', 14 May 1970, p. 2; Civil Affairs 1970 (1), Box 1578, A1 731, RG 472, NARA. Unnamed Survey regarding Minh Dam, 14 March 1970, p. 2; Civil Affairs 1970 (2), Box 1578, A1 731, RG 472, NARA.
[658] 'Record of Conversation with Village Chief at Tam Phuoc YS4558 2100 hrs to 2400 hrs 21 Nov 69', 21 November 1969, p. 4; 201/1/15 PART 2 A4531, NAA..
[659] WO2 Rayene Simpson to Warrant Officer Daniel Neville, 30 September 1970, PR03734, AWM, quoted in McNeill and Ekins, *Fighting to the Finish*, p. 404. 'Dak To' is probably Dak To in Kontum Province, where Simpson served prior to his move to Phuoc Tuy. Given the other towns mentioned in the sentence, however, it could be a reference to Dat Do.

considered bastions of Front support such as Hoa Long or An Ngai, advisers estimated that no more than 30-40 percent of the population could be considered pro-Front.[660] This support continued to be based on the factors that had driven it in the early 1960s – a mixture of political nationalism, economic self-interest, and family and community ties. Continued access to villages enabled the Front to go on stoking the flames of grievance and belief in the cause, further slowing the pacification process.

The decline in security in the province was gradually reflected in HES scores, which began to steadily decrease in February 1970. By the end of April that year Phuoc Tuy was ranked 34 out of 44 provinces in the country, slipping from a March ranking of 19th.[661] In February the AFV/Embassy Committee had described the decline in HES rankings as 'a belated recognition of a situation which had existed for some time', and in March PSA Christie described them as 'much more realistic'.[662] That pacification in Phuoc Tuy may actually have been failing, did not escape notice. 'Can we take pride in this?' Defence Minister Malcolm Fraser asked Army leadership after the release of the HES results.[663] Yet despite this consensus around the deterioration of security in the province, Weir kept the Task Force's focus solidly on the remote base areas on the fringes of the province until his departure in May 1970.

One exception to this relentless pursuit of enemy main forces was Operation PHOI HOP, conducted between 7 and 19 April by 8RAR. The brainchild of battalion commander Lieutenant Colonel Keith O'Neill, PHOI HOP aimed 'to deny the enemy entry into the villages of HOA LONG, AP SUOI NGHE,

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[660] Gabriel, 'An Ngai Village', 25 July 1970, pp. 1–2; Village and Hamlet Administration 1970, Box 1580, A1 731, RG 472, NARA. Annex A, 'Hamlet Survey', to 'Hoa Long Ground Team Report', 17 April 1971, *Province Survey,* pp. 1–4; 56 AWM304.
[661] T.S. Jones, 'Province HES Rankings as of 30 April 1970', 22 May 1970, p. 2; HES Construction & Maintenance 1970 (2), Box 1579, A1 731, RG 472, NARA.
[662] 'Joint AFV-Embassy Group on Pacification in Phuoc Tuy Province', 10 February 70, p. 3; 201/1/15 PART 2 A4531, NAA.. Martin S. Christie, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy Province – Period Ending 31 March 1970', 31 March 1970, p. 1; Pacification Study Files 1970, Box 1584, A1 731, RG 472, NARA.
[663] Fraser (Minister for Defence), minute to Wilton (CCOSC), 1 July 1970, Defence file 70/858 TS 2263, DD, quoted in McNeill and Ekins, *Fighting to the Finish* p. 429.

DUC MY and BINH BA'.[664] The accidental discovery of D445 in the Long Hais by 8RAR in February 1970 fed O'Neill's dissatisfaction with 1ATF's operational concept – a dissatisfaction driven by two basic problems. O'Neill had, like most of his contemporaries, served in Malaya and was intimately familiar with Commonwealth and Australian counter-revolutionary warfare doctrine and the thinking that underpinned it. In his opinion Weir's emphasis on reconnaissance-in-force operations conducted in remote base areas totally violated the most basic principle of this doctrine: the need to separate the insurgents from the people. The revelation during HAMMERSLEY that D445 had been regularly accessing the villages of Long Dien and Dat Do for the better part of seven months unmolested merely reinforced his belief that much of 1ATF's current efforts were wasted.[665]

The second problem was of a much more tactical nature. An analysis conducted by the Scientific Adviser's Office in October 1969 found that although bunker engagements had comprised just 13 percent of 1ATF contacts to that point, they had caused 44 percent of total 1ATF casualties, and like other battalion commanders O'Neill put a great deal of thought into how to attack them.[666] His conclusion after extensive exercises was that there was no satisfactory way to do so. Bunker contacts put Task Force infantry at an immediate disadvantage: the Front fired first and from prepared positions that often offered interlocking fields of fire. Usually this meant a small rear guard was able to delay the attacking force for some time, while the main body made its escape. It was both a reflection of common sense and experience that operations that put a premium on ambushing – in which Task Force infantry held the initiative on ground of their choosing – achieved more successful contacts with fewer Australian casualties than ones that went hunting for enemy units and inevitably encountered bunker systems.[667]

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[664] LTCOL K.J. O'Neill, '8RAR Combat Operations After Action Report – Operation Phoi Hop', p. 1; 7/8/8 AWM95.
[665] Hall, *Combat Battalion,* p. 60.
[666] Scientific Adviser's Office quoted in LTCOL R.A. Grey, 'VC/NVA Bunker Systems', 11 July 1970, p. 1; 7/7/50 AWM95.
[667] Robert Hall and Andrew Ross, 'Kinetics in Counterinsurgency', *Journal of Small Wars and Insurgencies,* Vol. 23, No. 2, 2009, pp. 509–511.

PHOI HOP looked to solve both of these problems. The after-action report stated that:

> Infiltration by the VC into HOA LONG, AP SUOI NGHE, DUC MY and BINH BA was being persistently achieved…These infiltrations were being carried out by groups of up to 30. There were, then, profitable ambush targets to be had and at known modal [sic] points. Ambushes were therefore positioned on known routes to these modal [sic] points.[668]

The units in question came not only from Chau Duc infrastructure and C41 District Company but also D440 battalion. By placing ambushes on expected infiltration routes in and around villages 8RAR could prevent access to populated areas while simultaneously fighting large enemy groups on terms that were highly favourable to the Australians. This was exactly what happened. Over the course of twelve days 8RAR initiated numerous ambushes that resulted in 11 confirmed enemy dead, eight wounded and six ralliers for the loss of three Australian wounded. Among those killed were a number of VCI including the assistant secretary for the Chau Duc Party Committee and the leader of the Binh Ba guerrillas. The AAR notes that while these results were good the true value of the operation lay in its effect on Front logistics, as PHOI HOP 'significantly disrupted enemy plans for offensive action and supply collections'.[669]

The close ambushing concept would be further validated by 8RAR during Operation NUDGEE in May, and would become a central part of Task Force operations under the command of Weir's successor, Brigadier W.G. Henderson. Although not mentioning his predecessor by name, Henderson explicitly rejected Weir's operational concept:

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[668] LTCOL K.J. O'Neill, '8RAR Combat Operations After Action Report – Operation Phoi Hop', p. 1; 7/8/8 AWM95.
[669] LTCOL K.J. O'Neill, '8RAR Combat Operations After Action Report – Operation Phoi Hop', May 70, p. 3; 7/8/8 AWM95.

> Well, I have never been a "pile-on" fellow, I don't believe in chasing shadows, the intelligence that was provided was often shadow intelligence…I could see no real point in chasing shadows around the green when all that was required, really, was a major effort to separate the VC from the VCI, in other words, stop the supply of medical supplies, of food and this type of thing from the villages out in the green, because, it was quite clear nothing was going to come the other way, because the L of C had been cut, the ammunition supply, the weapon supply, and so on, and it was in this general area that I started to operate.[670]

As Henderson intimated, the decision to concentrate so heavily on denying access to villages was driven in part by the heavy strain put on external Communist logistics. In May South Vietnamese and US forces had entered into Cambodia, targeting Front sanctuaries and logistical hubs. Although enormously controversial politically, particularly in the US, the Cambodian operations severely disrupted the Communist logistical network in South Vietnam.[671] For the Front units stationed in Phuoc Tuy, villages became almost the only source of supply left. Cutting off that source thus promised to strike a particularly heavy blow.[672]

Close ambushing undoubtedly fulfilled this aim over the next eight months. At the end of April 1970 Henderson divided the province between his three infantry battalions, with each battalion responsible for ambushing within its own area of operations.[673] This approach produced immediate results, with the PSA writing at the that end of May that 'there was a significant reduction in VC intrusions into the villages and hamlets of Duc Thanh, Long Le, Long Dien and Dat Do' which he attributed largely 'to the deployment of 2 Battalions of 1ATF into operational bases and ambush positions adjacent to the LOCs [lines of communication] and in area contiguous to the population'.[674] Satisfied that close ambushing was a sound concept, Henderson increased the complexity of operations. CUNG CHUNG I-III (Together) ran from June 1970 to January 1971

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[670] Transcript of interview with MAJGEN W.G. Henderson by LTCOL R.F. Morison, 22 March 1972, Sydney, pp. 5–6; 2 AWM107.
[671] James H. Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam: how America left and South Vietnam lost its war*, University Press of Kansas, Lawrence, 2008, pp. 83–84.
[672] Hall, *Combat Battalion,* p. 60.
[673] Interview with MAJGEN W.G. Henderson, 22 March 1972, pp. 9–10; 2 AWM107.
[674] LTCOL John J. Bacci, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy Province – Period Ending 31 May 1970', 31 May 1970, p. 1; Pacification Study Files 1970, Box 1584, A1 731, RG 472, NARA.

and represented a sophisticated effort to deny the Front access to the population over a long period. In addition to mounting overnight ambushes, the Australian infantry worked in close cooperation with the province Territorial forces and police to regulate the flow of people and supplies in and out of villages during the daytime.[675] This cooperation also served as a form of Vietnamisation. By partnering Australian and local units for extended periods, the advantage of the original MAT concept (drawing on the proficiency and knowledge of American and Australian troops) were maximised while the disadvantage (the rotation of teams after comparatively short periods) was minimised. Henderson described it as 'training by example'.[676]

The majority of ambushes mounted by the Task Force and RVNAF during this period never made contact with an increasingly cautious and weak enemy. Yet when contact was made, the results could be devastating for the Front. On 1 May 1970, two 8RAR ambushes located a kilometre or so to the west of the Gallia rubber plantation in Duc Thanh district made contact with a Front infiltration party made up of members of the Binh Ba guerrillas and the Chau Duc district company. Only four bodies were recovered by the Australians, but two survivors who had rallied immediately after the ambush stated that a total of ten cadre had been killed. These ten dead represented a significant portion of the Binh Ba village infrastructure, including the secretary of the village Party chapter.[677] One of the consequences of close ambushing was that it killed many members of the Front political infrastructure as they guided resupply parties into villages, or attempted to enter areas to conduct propaganda. Close ambushing thus not only eroded the Front's overall strength in Phuoc Tuy, it diminished the Front's political presence by neutralising members of the infrastructure in a way that the Phoenix program had been unable to do.

[675] McNeill and Ekins, *Fighting to the Finish,* pp. 444–447.
[676] Interview with MAJGEN W.G. Henderson, 22 March 1972, p. 10; 2 AWM107.
[677] Annex B, 'Intelligence Summary', p. 5, to LTCOL K.J. O'Neill, '8RAR Combat Operations After Action Report Operation Nudgee', 30 July 1970; 7/8/9 AWM95.

Communist histories acknowledge the efficacy of what they call the 'barrier-shield tactic', although they consider it to have begun in early 1970 during HAMMERSLEY:

> This "barrier-shield tactic" was even more dangerous for us than their "bunkers". The local forces and 445 Battalion were almost never able to slip into the hamlets by night. The numbers of our casualties and those captured increased daily…A time of hunger, difficulties and violence began…Sometimes our troops struck the Australian "barrier" immediately at the jungle's fringe – sometimes in the middle of the fields – and there were times when we only engaged them at the very edge of the hamlet. No matter what track or route we took, we couldn't slip through. The enemy had all the initiative – so, if we struck them, we just had to handle matters and suffer their heavy firepower. We were lucky to stay alive – and there was no thought of counter-attacking them.[678]

In the event, supply shortages and continued orders to attack the pacification program left Front units little choice but to try to fight their way through the ambushes. D445 began forming 'suicide squads' that were intended to trip Task Force ambushes, allowing re-supply parties to move through unmolested. Although the D445 history describes this tactic as a 'great success' it was one of desperation – at a time when Front forces were supposed to be rebuilding their strength in anticipation of a ceasefire, the battalion was forced to sacrifice lives to ensure even some supply.[679]

Dat Do describes this period of close ambushing as leading to a 'tense situation' in which 'up to 245 Long Dat cadre and soldiers were killed' and '188 of our patriotic infrastructure members were arrested and imprisoned'.[680] In neighbouring Chau Duc district, the combination of access denial and company-size reconnaissance-in-force operations seriously eroded the capability and influence of the NLF. Between July and October, 14 members of the district rallied to the government. They described a core group of cadre and soldiers drawn from the district party apparatus and district committee as reeling from food shortages and constant movement to escape Task Force sweeps, airstrikes

[678] Chamberlain, *The Viet Cong D445 Battalion,* p. 75.
[679] Chamberlain, *The Viet Cong D445 Battalion,* p. 77.
[680] Huong (ed), *The History of the Struggle*, p. 48.

and artillery fire.[681] Chau Duc district contained approximately half of Phuoc Tuy's population, and included traditional Front strongholds such as Hoa Long. But by the end of October, 1ATF intelligence estimated that the total strength of the District – including village party chapters, guerrilla sections, the district political apparatus and C41 district company – numbered just 86 effectives and 94 non-effectives. Although still nominally tasked with executing Resolution 9, units in Chau Duc had been reduced to merely trying to survive.[682]

For these cadre and guerrillas, the daily struggle to survive at the end of 1970 was probably made particularly bitter by the fact that Phuoc Tuy was experiencing one of its best harvests in years. Approximately 13,000 metric tons of rice were harvested at the end of 1970, up from 11,440 the previous year.[683] The harvest would increase again to 18,250 tons at the end of 1971. This level of growth also occurred in the province's secondary industries. Phuoc Tuy's fishing industry increased its annual catch from 12,259 tons in 1967 to 38,000 in 1971. Production of salt increased from 49,670 to 64,800 tons over the same time frame, and production of lumber nearly tripled from 2,667 to 7,681 tons. Only rubber production fell, from 1,880 to 1,000 tons – a reflection of the heavy fighting in Binh Ba in 1969.[684] But overall, the trend was clearly one of strong economic growth – a fact consistently highlighted by advisers between 1968 and 1971.[685]

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[681] 1ATF Battle Intelligence Section, 'Chau Duc Order of Battle', 23 October 1970, p. 6; 190 AWM304.
[682] 1ATF Battle Intelligence Section, 'Chau Duc Order of Battle', 23 October 1970, p. 6; 190 AWM304.
[683] Chart 20 of 'Phuoc Tuy Province – 1970 PD plan – Phase I', 31 May 1970; HES – Construction & Maintenance (1), Box 1579, A1 731, RG 472, NARA. Despite the date, the chart in question is annotated with pencil – suggesting it may have been filled in later in the year. The figures accord roughly with those given by Geoffrey Fox for hectares cultivated and yield per hectare – Geoffrey B. Fox, 'The Agricultural Development of Phuoc Tuy Province, South Vietnam', March 1971, pp. 11–12; 101 AWM304.
[684] All figures from 'Province Measurement (Comparisons) – Phuoc Tuy Province', undated, p. 3; Upgrade 1972, Box 1596, A1 731, RG 472, NARA.
[685] See for example Mulcahy, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy', 31 August 1968, p. 1; Province Reports 1968 (1), Box 1575, A1 731, RG 0472, NARA; and Martin S. Christie, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy – period ending 31 January 1970', 31 January 1970, p. 1; Pacification Studies 1970, Box 1584, A1 731, RG 0472, NARA.

What made the steady growth in rice yields between 1969 and 1971 particularly impressive was that it came about despite fluctuating levels of cultivated paddy. In 1966, 8,000 hectares of paddy had produced 18,000 tons of rice, at 2.2 metric tons per hectare.[686] Four years later in 1970, the amount of cultivated paddy in Phuoc Tuy had fallen by nearly 20 percent to 6,500 hectares, and the annual harvest by 30 percent.[687] Yet in 1971, just a year later, an only marginal increase in available paddy led to a 40 percent increase in the rice harvest. What explained these fluctuations? Partly responsible were the expected oscillations in rainfall and temperature that influence agriculture everywhere. Far more critical, however, was the growing use of the high-yield IR-8 rice strain. Known colloquially as 'miracle rice', IR-8 could deliver four or five times the yield of traditional rice varieties. First cultivated in Phuoc Tuy in 1968, the amount of IR-8 planted in the province steadily increased over the next three years. By 1971 IR-8 accounted for around 12,000 tons, or 60 percent, of the rice harvested in Phuoc Tuy, despite occupying only 38 percent of the cultivated paddy.[688] Much of Phuoc Tuy's economic growth was thus attributable to miracle rice.

'Miracle rice' was a tangible product of American efforts to modernise Cold War Asia. Developed in the laboratories and fields of the Ford- and Rockefeller Foundation-funded International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) in the Philippines, IR-8 and its other high-yield cousins offered a comparatively simple solution to the enormous problem of Asian poverty.[689] A decade after President Truman had warned of the destabilising effects of poverty in the developing world, American officials watched with alarm as population growth in Asia outstripped available food supplies. High-yield crop varieties such as miracle rice were a solution that did not require radical improvements in supporting infrastructure or land development. For men like President Johnson,

[686] 'Province Measurement (Comparisons) – Phuoc Tuy Province', undated, p. 3; Upgrade 1972, Box 1596, A1 731, RG 472, NARA.
[687] Chart 20 of 'Phuoc Tuy Province – 1970 PD plan – Phase I', 31 May 1970; HES – Construction & Maintenance (1), Box 1579, A1 731, RG 472, NARA.
[688] 'Province Measurement (Comparisons) – Phuoc Tuy Province', undated, p. 3; Upgrade 1972, Box 1596, A1 731, RG 472, NARA.
[689] Cullather, *The Hungry World,* p. 167.

who saw poverty as the key issue in Asia, IR-8 was indeed a miracle. 'If we are to win our war,' Johnson thundered in a speech at the IRRI in October 1966, 'against poverty, and against disease, and against ignorance, and against illiteracy, and against hungry stomachs, then we have got to succeed in projects like this.'[690]

Yet as Nick Cullather argues, many Americans perceived the value of IR-8 as lying beyond its ability to alleviate poverty. Miracle rice was a physical embodiment of modernity, something tangible to the average Asian peasant in a way the grandiose nation-building projects of men like Diem and Nehru were not. 'The dark green rice stopped where consumerism, allegiance, and order left off,' Cullather observes, 'and subsistence, insurgency and isolation began: at the edge of the free world'.[691] Moreover, this modernist vision promised to be self-sustaining. Released from subsistence by IR-8's higher yields, the peasant would become a consumer. Cullather cites then-Vice President Richard Nixon's famous confrontation with Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev at the American National Exhibition in Moscow in 1959 as an example of this view. While Communism might provide equality, capitalism could deliver a dishwasher and a television.[692] Miracle rice thus loomed as a particularly important weapon in the ideological struggle across Asia.

This vision of a rural middle class built on IR-8 seemed particularly possible in South Vietnam and the fertile lands of the Mekong Delta. Between 1963 and 1966 the South Vietnamese government had tried to placate dissent in the country's swelling urban areas by keeping the official price of rice low through the importation of cheap US product. During the winter of 1966–67, the decision was taken to raise the official price of rice to restore competitiveness to domestic farmers. With both prices for rice and other food products and

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[690] Lyndon B. Johnson, 'Remarks at the International Rice Research Institute, Los Banos, the Philippines,' 26 October 1966. Placed online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project.* The IRRI has also put a video online of a news reports that covers Johnson's visit and shows the end of the President's speech. See: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WEwdkz7XK2s.>
[691] Cullather, *The Hungry World,* p. 160.
[692] Cullather, *The Hungry World,* p. 161.

South Vietnam's urban population steadily increasing, a strong incentive now existed for farmers to aim for a surplus.[693] Vietnamese and American authorities hoped that by increasing yields, and thus the size of a farmer's surplus, IR-8 would give farmers excess capital for the first time in their lives – capital that could be invested in improvements such as tractors or fertiliser, consumer goods, or both. Miracle rice also appealed to pacification planners as a way of clearly differentiating areas controlled by the government from those that continued to be controlled by the Front. 'The spread of miracle rice,' William Colby observed after the war, 'would occur in the communities where new local territorial forces were assigned and self-defense groups organized.'[694] IR-8 became an integral part of annual pacification plans, with provinces expected to meet targets for cultivation. Ultimately miracle rice promised to deliver two things for the RVN: food security through self-sufficiency in rice production, and a rural middle class loyal to Saigon rather than the Front.[695]

Some evidence points to this vision of IR-8-driven consumerism coming true in Phuoc Tuy. Throughout Vietnam, IR-8 gained the nickname 'Honda rice' for its ability to generate the money necessary for a farmer to purchase a Honda motorbike.[696] By the end of 1971 over 6,000 motorbikes were registered in Phuoc Tuy, although the absence of baseline data makes it hard to gauge how quickly the number had grown over previous years. Other consumer goods also increased, however. The number of privately owned radios in Phuoc Tuy increased from 8,400 in 1968 to 13,092 in July 1970 and 19,119 by the end of 1971. The number of privately owned televisions also increased, from 45 in 1969 to 1078 in July 1970 and 1281 at the end of 1971.[697] Although the province population increased by 20 percent over a similar period, these increases in luxury goods supported the contention that rice surpluses were driving an increase in wealth and consumer spending within Phuoc Tuy.

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[693] William J.C. Logan, 'How Deep is the Green Revolution in South Vietnam?', *Asian Survey,* Vol. 11, No. 4, 1971, p. 322.
[694] Colby, *Lost Victory,* p. 266.
[695] Cullather, *The Hungry World,* p. 177.
[696] Cullather, *The Hungry World,* p. 177.
[697] Figures for 1966 and 1971 are from 'Province Measurement (Comparisons) – Phuoc Tuy Province', undated, p. 1; Upgrade 1972, Box 1596, A1 731, RG 472, NARA. Figures from 1970 are from MAJ Miles W. Farmer, 'Psyops Monthly Report', August 1970, p. 1; R569/1/189 AWM 98.

This growth in electronic media was particularly dangerous for the Front. Previously, both the government and Front had fought a propaganda battle within the villages through similar mediums – the distribution of printed material, public meetings or word of mouth. Both sides worked to disrupt the activities of the other, with the Front frequently attacking and destroying Vietnamese Information Service (VIS) reading rooms in villages. The proliferation of private radios and televisions threatened to upset this balance. With good signal strength for government-controlled television and radio stations throughout Phuoc Tuy, many villagers now had access to a government-controlled information source the Front could not easily disrupt.[698] The popularity of radio and television within the province also seemed to confirm the political power of consumerism and modernisation. Radio and television tied the rural periphery to the urban centre in a way not previously possible, and in a way the Front could not compete with. Just like miracle rice, these radios and televisions were a tangible expression of what capitalism and the government could deliver – and what the Front could not.

Yet the increase in consumer spending within Phuoc Tuy did not necessarily signal a decisive shift in allegiances to the government, as the authorities had hoped. In early 1971 Australian agricultural expert Geoffrey Fox visited Phuoc Tuy at the request of the Department of Foreign Affairs. Although acknowledging the potential of miracle rice, Fox argued that there were a number of structural barriers to it achieving the transformative results pacification authorities hoped for. Fox noted that IR-8 was considered an inferior rice to eat compared to traditional varieties and so attracted a much lower price per ton. To make the switch from traditional strains to IR-8 worthwhile, it was necessary to teach farmers how to maximise their yield through the use of fertilisers and herbicides and careful water management. This was made difficult, however, by the innate conservatism of many of Phuoc Tuy's farmers. Lacking access to easy credit, and often already in debt to a

[698] Farmer, 'Psyops Monthly Report', August 1970, p. 1; R569/1/189 AWM 98.

landlord, farmers were unwilling to abandon their traditional methods and go further into debt by gambling on modern techniques.[699]

In Fox's opinion, however, at least as big an obstacle to the adoption of IR-8 and to increasing agricultural production in general was the continued dominance of tenancy in Phuoc Tuy. As Fox put it, 'the effect of market incentives for increased and improved production can be greatly reduced, if a large share of the farmers' income passes to landlords'.[700] Although the rental rate was fixed by law at 20 percent, Fox reported that by 1971 in practice rates were between one quarter and one third of the anticipated harvest and were collected in advance.[701] This went to the basic flaw in the argument, as discussed in Chapter Two, that what caused the insurgency in Vietnam was poverty. Farmers did not support the Front because they were impoverished but because the Front, through its redistribution of land and suppression of rent, offered them a more favourable distribution of the wealth they had created. This remained true regardless of how much the overall level of wealth increased. If a rural middle class was going to emerge in South Vietnam, the ending of tenancy was essential.

President Thieu's actions between 1968 and 1970 show his gradual realisation of the need to make land reform a centrepiece of pacification. In this respect he was ahead of many of his American advisers. In 1967 Robert Komer and the leadership within CORDS had made land reform one of the eight priorities under Project TAKEOFF, but had been stymied not only by a lack of interest within the South Vietnamese government but also opposition within the US Agency for International Development (USAID). As had been the case during the Diem era, both Vietnamese and USAID officials worried that land reform would alienate existing landholders, at the time one of the few segments

[699] Geoffrey B. Fox, 'The Agricultural Development of Phuoc Tuy Province, South Vietnam', March 1971, p. 14; 101 AWM304.
[700] Fox, 'The Agricultural Development of Phuoc Tuy Province, South Vietnam', March 1971, p. 36; 101 AWM304.
[701] Fox, 'The Agricultural Development of Phuoc Tuy Province, South Vietnam', March 1971, p. 36; 101 AWM304.

of civil society whose anti-communism was unquestioned. Frustrated with a lack of progress, Komer let the matter slide.[702]

Thieu's consolidation of power after the 1967 elections made land reform possible, while the upheavals of 1968 appear to have convinced the him that it was necessary. Even before the Tet Offensive began in February 1968, Thieu pushed through new administrative guidelines that streamlined the process through which land seized by the Diem government was distributed to farmers. This revived a moribund program, with 60,000 acres distributed over the course of 1968 alone.[703] Beginning in November 1968, Thieu also issued a series of decrees designed to stop, in the short term, landlords resuming the collection of rent in areas restored to government control. These measures were intended to avoid a repeat of the situation in 1954–55, in which the return of government and landlord control had become closely associated in the public mind.[704] Finally, Thieu's efforts to end tenancy culminated in the 'Land to the Tiller' Act, signed into law by the President on 26 March 1970.

This law was celebrated almost immediately in the US and Vietnam as a potential turning point in the conduct of the war. 'For the first time,' wrote political scientist Roy Prosterman in August, 'Saigon is striking at the roots of Viet Cong rural support: at the single most fundamental issue that, over the years, has motivated large numbers of peasants to support the Viet Cong in manifold ways, and many more to be at best apathetic towards Saigon.'[705] At its most basic, land to the tiller (LTTT) aimed to transfer ownership of land to those currently working it. Landlord opposition was removed through generous compensation provisions, with owners receiving the equivalent in cash and bonds of 2.5 times the annual paddy yield. The act also made a deliberate effort to minimise the potential impact of the government's sclerotic bureaucracy by

[702] Hunt, *Pacification,* pp. 104–105. For an examination of the lingering suspicion many American officials had towards land reform during this period, see Sansom, *The Economics of Insurgency,* pp. 228–236.
[703] Prosterman, 'Land-to-the-Tiller in South Vietnam: The Tables Turn', p. 759.
[704] Prosterman, 'Land-to-the-Tiller in South Vietnam: The Tables Turn', p. 760.
[705] Prosterman, 'Land-to-the-Tiller in South Vietnam: The Tables Turn', p. 764.

streamlining the processes involved in surveying land and transferring title.[706] This was largely successful, and the government achieved its aim of redistributing 2.5 million acres (just over 1 million hectares) of land nationwide within three years.[707]

Historians have disagreed over the effectiveness of LTTT in achieving the government's objectives in the countryside. Gabriel Kolko dismissed LTTT in his 1985 work *Anatomy of a War* as having little impact on South Vietnam's increasingly distorted economy beyond giving the economically dominant landlord class even greater reserves of capital, thanks to the generous compensation measures.[708] Unlike Kolko, both Jeffrey Race and Eric Bergerud viewed LTTT as a good policy that nonetheless came too late to make a significant difference to the struggle in the countryside.[709] As Race put it:

> The program was widely propagandized as a "revolutionary" step, and had it been carried out in 1945, it certainly would have been. In the context of 1970, however, it was hardly revolutionary and in fact little more than the Saigon government's stamp of approval on a land redistribution already carried out by the [Vietnamese Workers] Party – in many cases a quarter of a century before. Communist defectors interviewed made the striking analogy that one is, after all, hardly grateful to a thief who is compelled by force of circumstance to return stolen property.[710]

A challenge to this broad consensus came in the late 1990s from historian Mark Moyar. In *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey,* Moyar argued that many of the arguments above had their roots in Western academic prejudice and were largely unsupported by evidence. In Moyar's opinion, 'Most South Vietnamese villagers cared much more about their current well-being than about what the GVN and the VC had done in the past,' and 'they tended to lean toward the group that could best serve their interests in the present, which at that time was the GVN.'[711]

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[706] Prosterman, 'Land-to-the-Tiller in South Vietnam: The Tables Turn', pp. 761–763.
[707] Hunt, *Pacification,* pp. 263–264
[708] Gabriel Kolko, *Anatomy of a War,* Pantheon Books, New York, 1985, pp. 391–392.
[709] Bergerud, *Dynamics of Defeat,* p. 298.
[710] Race, *War Comes to Long An*, p. 273.
[711] Moyar, *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey*, p. 312.

Moyar pointed to a number of studies undertaken by social scientists in the Mekong Delta in the relatively short time between the implementation of the project in 1970–73 and the fall of Saigon in 1975. One such study found LTTT had succeeded in its aim of creating a large, rural middle class that was politically aligned with the Saigon government:

> In sum, the Land to the Tiller program is a splendid means to pacification. It creates equality among farmers and abolishes lifelong tendencies of tenant farmers to think of their lives as static, hopeless, poverty-ridden and of themselves as inferiors…It is helping turn a once-disaffected, politically neutral mass of potential and sometimes actual revolutionaries (formerly providing rice, information, labour, and military manpower to the enemy) into middle-class farmers in support of the regime.[712]

They key point within this report, as this quote suggests, was that the changes LTTT wrought in the attitude of farmers was far more important than the its impact on their economic status. Freed from the economic restraints of tenancy, farmers abandoned their conservative attitudes toward cultivation techniques and aggressively pursued higher yields, using their new reserves of capital to invest in mechanical aids, insecticides and fertiliser. In other words, LTTT transformed the attitude of farmers in the way that pacification planners, particularly Americans, had hoped miracle rice would.

Did this transformation occur in Phuoc Tuy? The simple answer is that, in the absence of detailed surveys such as those conducted by Bush et al., it is impossible to tell. Even basic data on land distribution is hard to come by, as the peak year of implementation in the province coincided with a steady drawdown in the advisory presence. Successive PSAs gave the issue little attention in monthly reports beyond intermittently reporting the number of acres and titles distributed – suggesting that advisers continued to underestimate the importance of land reform to the end. These monthly totals show that between 1970 and 1972 between 3,000–3,500 hectares of land were redistributed in Phuoc Tuy. This was roughly half of the 6,200–6,800 hectares of cultivated rice

[712] Henry C. Bush et al., The Impact of *Land to the Tiller Program in the Mekong Delta,* Control Data Corporation, 1972, p. 88.

land in the province and a third of the 9,975 hectares of total agricultural land (as LTTT provided for the distribution of all agricultural land, not just rice paddy).[713] Data on tenancy rates in the province prior to LTTT remains frustratingly vague, but CORDS province surveys state that outside of Duc Thanh district 90–94 percent of farmers were tenants.[714] It can thus be estimated that roughly one third of farmers in Phuoc Tuy, nearly all of whom were tenants, were granted ownership of the land they worked between late 1970 and early 1973.

In the absence of detailed data, the impact of LTTT on the province's economic fortunes and political allegiances remains open to question. The reforms at least appear to have been popular in Phuoc Tuy. In a May 1970 survey conducted in the villages of Binh Gia, Long Dien, Phuoc Hoa and Phu My, most respondents praised LTTT 'because it really brings justice to the farmers'.[715] This view was reflected in the number of applications received under LTTT in Phuoc Tuy in 1971 and 1972. Although the law was passed in March 1970, the program was hit by repeated delays in Phuoc Tuy and did not start until September that year; by December just 29 percent of the annual target had been achieved, with the PSA citing a lack of accurate aerial photography as one of the reasons. This problem was eventually overcome, and the targets for redistribution of land were largely achieved in 1971 and then exceeded in 1972.[716] Yet on the other hand, Phuoc Tuy's diversified economy

[713] LTTT totals are based on Robert L. Walkinshaw, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy Province – Period Ending 31 January 1971', 31 January 1971, p. 5; Raymond L. Perkins, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy Province – Period Ending 31 July 1971', 31 July 1971, p. 3; Raymond L. Perkins, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy Province – Period Ending 31 December 1971', 31 December 1971, p. 3; all in Province Reports 1971, Box 1592, A1 731, RG0472, NARA; and LTCOL Giac P. Modica, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy Province – Period Ending 30 October 1972', 4 November 1972, p. 5; Province Reports 1972, Box 1593, A1 731, RG0472, NARA. Agricultural land total estimates from 'Survey – Phuoc Tuy Province', May 1969, p. 6; 300 AWM103 and Chart 20 of 'Phuoc Tuy Province – 1970 PD plan – Phase I', 31 May 1970; HES – Construction & Maintenance (1), Box 1579, A1 731, RG 472, NARA.

[714] See 'Survey – Phuoc Tuy Province', May 1969; 300 AWM103 and 'District HES Evaluation', 23 October 1970, HES 1970 (1), Box 1577, A1 731, RG0472, NARA.

[715] 'Farmers Attitude Towards the Land Reform [sic]', 13 to 20 May 1970, p. 1; Civil Affairs 2, Container 1578, A1 731, RG0472, NARA.

[716] Walkinshaw, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy Province', 31 January 1971, p. 5; Perkins, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy Province', 31 July 1971, p. 3; Perkins, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy Province', 31 December 1971, p. 3; all in Province Reports 1971, Box 1592, A1 731,

meant that the overall impact of LTTT was more limited than in the Mekong Delta. Although estimates varied by year and district, approximately a third of the province workforce were farmers, so those who benefited directly from land reform could have represented as little as 10% of the province's workforce.[717]

Another program that had some success in generating support for the government, and one that had a larger reach, was Village Self-Development (VSD), which had begun in earnest in the province in 1969. VSD worked by allocating a certain amount of funds to individual villages. The villagers themselves would then nominate projects for which the funds could be used. Crucially, villagers were expected to contribute to the projects either by providing labour or raising money. VSD thus not only ensured that projects were targeted at the needs of villagers but helped foster a sense of community by requiring villagers to work cooperatively with local government and each other to achieve a common goal. The program guidelines emphasised that '[t]he key role is to be played by the people; this is of first importance, and the government support is of secondary rank'.[718]

Although VSD funds could be used and occasionally were to restore of *dinhs* (temples) and build facilities such as information reading rooms, in Phuoc Tuy the projects which generated the most villager interest and contributions were those that had a direct impact on the economic fortunes of the village.[719] Typical examples included the creation of low-interest agricultural loan funds, improved fishing equipment, sinking of wells, animal husbandry with pigs or cattle, and road-building and repair.[720] These projects offer the same incentives that drove the success of LTTT in the Mekong Delta. In the same way that the

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RG0472, NARA; and Modica, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy Province', 4 November 1972, p. 5; Province Reports 1972, Box 1593, A1 731, RG0472, NARA.

[717] 'Survey – Phuoc Tuy Province', May 1969, pp. 4–5; 300 AWM103 and Fox, 'Agricultural Development', p. 1; 101 AWM304.

[718] Ministry of Revolutionary Development, 'The Village Self-Development Program', 24 February 1969, p. 3.

[719] Annex E, 'After Action Report', to CAPT P.R. Hudson, 'Long Diem Ground Team Report, 28 Jun 71–2 Jul 71', 3 July 1971; 56 AWM304.

[720] See for example Annex B, 'Self Development' to 2LT M.L. Morrison, 'Long Hai Ground Team Report, 7 Jun 71–11 Jun 71' in *Province Survey;* 56 AWM304.

excess capital freed by LTTT drove a cycle of investment and reward, VSD allowed villagers to undertake capital-intensive projects that had a direct economic benefit to them.

When surveyed in late 1969 and early 1970, villagers expressed satisfaction with the VSD program and acknowledged the role of both local and national government in facilitating a successful program. This was perhaps to be expected in villages such as Phuoc Tinh, which was dominated by Catholic refugees who had settled in the area after 1954. But even in Binh Ba, traditionally dominated by the Front, villagers responded positively to the program as 'they recognised that the government made great efforts to raise the living conditions of the rural people during wartime. The GVN effort proved the willingness of the government to improve the living of poor people.'[721] Other villagers in Hoa Long compared the program favourably to regular government services, which they saw as functional but unresponsive to people's demands.[722]

The success of VSD in engaging and responding to the needs of the populace stood in contrast to some of the more ambitious projects undertaken by 1 Australian Civil Affairs Unit (1ACAU). Throughout 1ACAU's time in Vietnam, villagers responded positively to the contributions made by the unit – particularly in areas such as health, where Australian doctors were able to provide treatments not normally available to villagers.[723] But the unit's efforts at more substantial projects were not always as well received. Between 1968 and 1971 1ACAU erected 14 Southern Cross windmills throughout the province in an effort to ensure regular water supply in villages during the dry season. While well-intentioned, the program stretched the technical capability of the unit and was conducted with minimal Vietnamese involvement. As a result the villagers took little interest in the windmills and did not carry out maintenance

[721] Local Survey Detachment Report, 'Self-Development Program and Political Organization in Four Villages of Phuoc Tuy', 20 March 1970, p. 10; Box 1583, A1 731, RG472, NARA.
[722] Local Survey Detachment Report, 'Popular Views Toward Government Services in Binh Gia and Hoa Long Village, Phuoc Tuy', 3 April 1970, p. 2; Box 1578, A1 731, RG472, NARA.
[723] LSDR, 'Popular Views Toward Government Services in Binh Gia and Hoa Long Village, Phuoc Tuy', 3 April 1970, p. 6; Box 1578, A1 731, RG472, NARA.

on them; by January 1971 only five were still working, and an army report acknowledged 'that this situation may have been brought about by failing to have the villagers contribute to the construction'.[724]

Geoffrey Fox noted a similar problem in the agricultural section of the unit. 'Unbridled enthusiasm in the Civic Affairs Unit sometimes outruns good judgement and common sense,' he wrote, 'in the selection and planning of agricultural projects.'[725] Members of 1ACAU lacked experience and expertise in Asian agriculture and the language skills necessary to properly advise farmers. The unit undertook a series of projects that Fox criticised as being ignorant of market conditions and too small to create a profit for the farmer involved. Sorghum, for example, was a crop that demanded disproportionate investment of water and irrigation equipment – but had no local market, and was competing nationally with cheap US imports. As with the windmills, Fox noted that agricultural projects tended to be managed by 1ACAU with little input from the province Agricultural Service. In contrast, two Taiwanese advisers from the Chinese Agricultural Technical Group (CATG) who were attached to 1ACAU, proved invaluable. Their knowledge of rice-growing allowed them to correctly diagnose crop failure in Ap Suoi Nghe as the result of fungal infection rather than accidental defoliation and to suggest measures to correct the problem.[726]

The common thread that runs through many of 1ACAU's projects in Phuoc Tuy is the way in which theoretically simple solutions to apparently basic problems proved to be neither in practice. Increasing the water supply of villages through the application of basic and familiar technology was viewed as a straightforward and worthwhile task, yet it was derailed in the end by both technical problems and the indifference of those it was supposed to benefit. The creation of Ap Suoi Nghe in 1967 was a much more difficult task than the installation of windmills, but viewed as being within the capability of a military

[724] 'Report on Windmills – Phuoc Tuy', December 1970, quoted in Frost, *Australia's War in Vietnam,* p. 172.
[725] Fox, 'The Agricultural Development of Phuoc Tuy Province, South Vietnam', March 1971, p. 8; 101 AWM304.
[726] Fox, 'The Agricultural Development of Phuoc Tuy Province, South Vietnam', March 1971, pp. 8–9; 101 AWM304.

force that had carved a larger, functional base out of the jungle just a short distance away. For a generation of men who had experienced Australia's suburban growth after 1945, the benefits of this new, carefully planned model village over the scattered settlements of Slope 30 seemed self-evident. Yet Ap Suoi Nghe proved a disaster, both because of technical mistakes on the part of the Australians and its inhabitants' rejection of its modern ethos.

The failures of 1ACAU's projects represent in a microcosm the failure of the top-down nation-building model championed first under Diem and then to a lesser extent under President Lyndon B. Johnson. The imposition of programs that disrupted peasant life and did little to address their immediate concerns understandably did not succeed in generating support for the government in the countryside. The economic programs that began to impact Phuoc Tuy in 1970 had greater success precisely because they avoided this kind of central, rigid direction. Modernisation theory still underpinned much of the thinking behind Land to the Tiller, miracle rice and Village Self-Development. But rather than forcing villagers to make a sudden, decisive jump into a new social system, as the Strategic Hamlet Program had tried to do and Johnson's vision of a Mekong TVA implied, the economic reforms explored in this chapter created a process of gradual evolution. Above all, they gave the rural population agency, both to engage with the process itself and to use it to solve their own problems. By the end of 1970, the advantages of this diffused system were beginning to be felt in Phuoc Tuy.

As noted at the start of this chapter, in November 1970 8RAR completed its tour of Vietnam and returned to Australia. Seven months earlier, Prime Minister John Gorton had announced that the battalion would not be replaced. In the face of increasing domestic opposition to Australia's involvement in Vietnam, and over the objection of the Australian service chiefs, who favoured a 'one out, all out' policy, Gorton and his Liberal and Country Party colleagues had tied themselves to the Nixon Administration's policy of Vietnamisation and gradual withdrawals. Although no commitment was made as to when, or even if,

the remainder of 1ATF would leave Phuoc Tuy, it was obvious that the Task Force's time in the province was coming to a close.[727]

This threw into sharp relief the basic problem facing pacification at the end of 1970. The period between May and November 1970 was undoubtedly the nadir of the Front in Phuoc Tuy. 'The strength, morale, and influence of the VC and VCI has diminished to a level where now there is only minor enemy initiated activity,' one report from the Australian Directorate of Military Intelligence (DMI) stated.[728] The close ambushing of villages undertaken by 1ATF under Henderson had gutted the strength of the Front within the province and forced them to concentrate almost solely on survival. By denying them regular access to the villages, the Task Force had also created the space in which the economic and political reforms begun by the Thieu government could begin to take effect. By the end of 1970, Land to the Tiller, miracle rice and other policies were beginning to have an impact in Phuoc Tuy, driving a new wave of spending that Vietnamese and American officials hoped would irreversibly end the Front's appeal in rural areas.

Yet these reforms required time to mature, which in turn required the level of population security established by 1ATF to be continued in the medium to long term. The problem was that in the nine months between the Task Force's shift away from pacification support in September 1969 and its return to that mission in May 1970, the RF/PF had conspicuously failed to maintain adequate levels of population security. In its mid-November report, the AFV/Embassy Joint Committee on Pacification noted that while the intensive training given to RF units in the province as part of Operation CUNG CHUNG appeared to be achieving results, Territorial units in the province had previously shown improvement under the close supervision of advisers only to quickly regress when that supervision was removed. The committee 'concluded that it was not possible to forecast whether the improvement would be of a

[727] Peter Edwards, *A Nation at War,* Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 1997, pp. 240–243.
[728] 'The Situation in Phuoc Tuy Province', 2 November 1970, p. 1; 35 AWM347.

lasting nature'.[729] They would soon find out. As will be explored in the next chapter, in March 1971 the two-battalion Task Force returned to operations against Communist main force units on Phuoc Tuy's fringes. Six months later, it would be withdrawn altogether. If pacification was to succeed in Phuoc Tuy, the Territorial Forces had to perform at an adequate level.

[729] 'Joint AFV-Embassy Group on Pacification in Phuoc Tuy Province', 13 November 1970, p. 2; D/4/8 AWM257.

Chapter 9. 'The Wolves Were Circling'.

November 1970–November 1971.[730]

At the start of 1971, the Republic of Vietnam and its American and Australian allies appeared to be winning the war against the National Liberation Front and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. The success of the Cambodian incursion of mid-1970 in disrupting Communist logistics, and the strong performance of the ARVN units involved, suggested that Nixon's Vietnamisation policies were working.[731] Pacification had also made strong progress over the course of 1970, so much so that CORDS chief William Colby called for a shift in emphasis away from territorial security to internal security and development.[732] Upcoming Lower House and Presidential elections in the RVN promised to demonstrate the legitimacy of the Thieu government and its no-compromise policies to both domestic and international audiences. In the DRV, in contrast, Le Duan and other 'Southerners' within the Party leadership had to grapple with a growing war-weariness among the population and moderate sections of the Party that threatened to undercut the war effort.[733] At the same time, the Nixon Administration's increasingly successful pursuit of détente with the Soviet Union and rapprochement with the People's Republic of China threatened to isolate the DRV and starve it of the external support it needed to continue fighting the war in the south.[734] There was thus some cause for guarded optimism in January 1971 in Washington, Saigon and Canberra.

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[730] The full quote, 'The wolves were waiting beyond the firelight for the Australians to go', is from John Rowe, *Vietnam: The Australian Experience,* Time-Life Books, Sydney, 1987, p. 157. Rowe served as GSO2 (Int) with 1ATF in 1966.
[731] Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam,* pp. 83–84, 87–89.
[732] Laurence P. Dalcher to Mr Funkhouser, 'Your Memo of March 13: The "Formidable" Five', 3 April 1971, pp. 1-2; Civil Affairs Report, Box 1591, A1 731, RG472, NARA.
[733] Nguyen, *Hanoi's War,* pp. 196–199.
[734] Nguyen, *Hanoi's War,* pp. 194–195.

As this chapter shows, however, 1971 was not a year of triumph in Phuoc Tuy. Reduced to two battalions, 1ATF spent its time prior to withdrawal from Nui Dat in October of that year duelling with a series of PLAF and PAVN main force units that had established themselves in the Hat Dich base area on the Phuoc Tuy-Long Khanh border. In a series of sharp clashes over the course of eight months, the Task Force succeeded in preventing these units from threatening the province's populated areas, but could not dislodge them more than temporarily from the Hat Dich or Long Khanh border areas. As advisers recognised at the time, the clear implication was that after the Task Force withdrew, Phuoc Tuy's Territorial Forces would be left to face this main force threat alone. While the Province Chief was bullish about the ability of his forces to meet this threat, Australian and American advisers were not. What the events of 1971 clearly showed, then, was both the continuing threat posed to pacification by Communist main forces units and that Australian troop withdrawals were not based on an appreciable reduction in that Communist threat.

Nor did the elections of 1971 cement the legitimacy of the Thieu government as had been hoped. This chapter explores in depth the process outlined in the previous chapter of political reform that began in 1967 and culminated in the 1971 elections. The implementation of these democratic reforms had long been urged by US advisers, who saw them as critical for the success of pacification. Democratic governance at all levels of the RVN, advisers believed, would give the rural population a stake in the government, make it more accountable to them, and give it both domestic and international legitimacy. The experience of the democratic process in Phuoc Tuy saw some of these hopes fulfilled. Consistently high percentages of eligible voters turned out at elections throughout the period, and their voting patterns showed that they were making informed decisions and that a majority of them supported, if not Thieu himself, a pro-government position. Throughout this period, however, there was considerable evidence of government officials consistently manipulating the democratic process to achieve the results desired by the government – a fact which appears to have been recognised by the population

in Phuoc Tuy. Ultimately, as the events surrounding the elections of 1971 in particular emphasised, these reforms were not enough to give the government total legitimacy or accountability in the eyes of the people.

The last three months of Brigadier Henderson's tenure as commander of 1ATF were a time of transition for the Task Force. Although Henderson remained committed to his operational concept of close-in ambushing after the departure of 8RAR in November 1970, the Australian government's decision not to replace the battalion clearly signalled that the Task Force's time in Phuoc Tuy was coming to an end. As part of Operation PHOI HOP, which ran from 1 February to 2 May 1971, the Task Force began to hand control of the province's populated areas back to the province Territorial Forces. By 20 February 1971, province authorities were responsible for security in Dat Do, Long Dien, and the populated areas of Long Le, Xuyen Moc and Duc Thanh.[735] As a result of this handover the two remaining Task Force infantry battalions, 2RAR/NZ and the newly-arrived 3RAR, pushed deeper into the jungle areas bordering Dat Do and Xuyen Moc. Although the tactical approach of both battalions remained similar to that used for the past year, with individual platoons and companies often well dispersed and with a focus on ambushing, the emphasis was increasingly on pursuing Front units rather than on population security.[736]

This change in philosophy was confirmed when, on 28 February 1971, Brigadier B.A. McDonald succeeded Brigadier Henderson as the commander of 1ATF. Like previous commanders, McDonald had his own ideas about how the Task Force should operate:

> I personally saw the role of 1ATF…as being that of ensuring that VC and NVA forces entering the area must be detected. They would then, if it were possible, be brought to battle. In particular I believe that any enemy forces lodging in the Long Khanh Province [sic] in area adjacent to Phuoc Tuy must be dealt with by 1ATF.[737]

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[735] McNeill, and Ekins *Fighting to the Finish,* p. 504.
[736] LTCOL J.M. Church, '2RAR/NZ (ANZAC) Bn After Action Report, Operation Phoi Hop', 30 April 1971, p. 1; 7/2/87 AWM95.
[737] Transcript of interview of BRIG B.A. McDonald by MAJ I.G. McNeill, 12 July 1973, Canberra, p. 9; 2 AWM107.

McDonald's ideas were strikingly similar to those of Brigadier S.P. Weir. Like Weir, McDonald 'believed that where possible the whole resources of the Task Force should, if possible, be in the Clearing Zone … and that they should be employed pretty completely once a significant enemy target was located'.[738] The 'clearing zone' referred to the jungle areas of the province that were physically separate from populated areas. Under McDonald the Task Force would, in other words, return to hunting Communist main force units in their base areas on the fringes of the province.

McDonald justified the shift in focus in part as a response to Vietnamisation:

> I saw the need for the Province forces to take on all responsibility for the consolidation zone and for more of the clearing zone…It was quite clear also to me that the presence of 1ATF in Phuoc Tuy was unlikely to remain after 1971 and, therefore, it behoved the Vietnamese forces themselves to take more and more responsibility of having to care for the Province. To this end I was prepared to, and did assist, the Regional Forces to upgrade themselves.[739]

The parallels with Weir and his 'sink or swim' view of the Vietnamese are once again obvious. Like all Task Force commanders, McDonald's operational concept was partly dictated by matters outside his control. The needs of Vietnamisation, political as well as operational, demanded an expanded role for the Territorial Forces. Whereas Weir had largely chased shadows, McDonald could point to a large and growing enemy main force on the fringes of the province. But it is nonetheless striking how, even in the context of detailed doctrine and extensive individual and institutional experience of counterinsurgency, Australian commanders continued to have substantially different ideas on how best to prosecute the war in Phuoc Tuy.

Consequently, the focus of Task Force operations between March 1971 and the beginning of its final withdrawal in October the same year was attacking the Front units occupying base areas on the Phuoc Tuy/Long Khanh

[738] Interview with BRIG McDonald, 12 July 1973, p. 11.
[739] Interview with BRIG McDonald, 12 July 1973, p. 9.

border and in the Xuyen Moc corridor. In a series of operations over this seven-month period – BRIAR PATCH I and II, OVERLORD, HERMIT PARK, HAWKER, IRON FOX and IVANHOE – the Task Force targeted D445, 1 Battalion 274 Regiment, and 3 Battalion 33 Regiment.[740] Although the overall level of contacts generated by the Task Force during this period remained low compared to the highs of 1968, 1969 and the first six months of 1970, when Communists were found, the fighting was often bitter.[741] For the Australian and New Zealand soldiers involved this was a return to the frustrations and dangers of fighting in and against bunker systems, with small PAVN or PLAF rearguards often initiating contact at short range while their comrades escaped through Task Force cordons, and blocking positions rendered inadequate by a lack of troops.[742]

McDonald argued after the war that these operations had seized the initiative from the Communists and had repeatedly forced them out of the province, ensuring their influence over populated areas was minimal.[743] This argument is true in a narrow sense. During Operation IVANHOE in September, for example, the Task Force succeeded in forcing 33 PAVN Regiment out of Phuoc Tuy after it had entered the province and harrassed RF posts at Xa Bang and Ngai Giao.[744] But as AFV headquarters argued in August

> the presence of two enemy regiments on the northern border and the largely undetected *D445 Battalion* moving at will through both 1ATF and the Territorial Forces AO does not bode well for the time when the protective shields of the two 1ATF battalions are withdrawn from the Province.[745]

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[740] See McNeill and Ekins, *Fighting to the Finish* – pp. 757–763 for summary and Chs 15–18 for narrative.
[741] Chart 1, '1ATF Monthly Contacts, July 1967-December 1971', Appendix A, McNeill and Ekins, *Fighting to the Finish,* p. 774.
[742] For a first hand perspective of the fighting against bunker system during this period, see McKay, *In Good Company,* pp. 96-98 and 113-121. For an operational perspective, see Jerry Taylor, *Last Out: 4RAR/NZ (ANZAC) Battalion's second tour in Vietnam,* Allen & Unwin, Crow's Nest, 2001, pp. 209–234.
[743] Interview with BRIG McDonald, 12 July 1973, p. 15.
[744] Annex B, 'Intelligence Summary', to LTCOL J.B. Hughes, '4RAR/NZ After Action Report, Operation Ivanhoe', 4 November 1971, pp. 1–5.
[745] AFV Monthly Report, August 1971, 15 September 1971, Part One, Section Two, p. 4, quoted in McNeill and Ekins, *Fighting to the Finish* p. 587.

The two-battalion Task Force lacked the combat power to sustain operations against these units or to disrupt their logistic networks. US withdrawals and the inactivity of 18 ARVN Division also meant that a repetition of past joint operations, or a renewed pressure on the enemy in neighbouring Long Khanh, was out of the question. Whatever success the Task Force achieved in keeping main force units out of Phuoc Tuy was clearly temporary.

McDonald felt comfortable shifting the focus of the Task Force away from pacification support in part because of the confidence expressed by the Province Chief, Lieutenant Colonel Nguyen Van Tu, in the ability of the province forces to maintain security in and around Phuoc Tuy's populated areas in the absence of 1ATF.[746] Tu had become Province Chief a year earlier when Lieutenant Colonel Truoc had been promoted and made Chief of Staff of the ARVN 7th Division. Although he had an impressive professional education resume, Tu was rated only an average officer by advisers when he arrived in Phuoc Tuy in January 1970, with his dossier stating 'he lacks ambition, forcefulness or aggression' and that in previous posts he had done the 'minimum required'.[747] By February 1971, however, Tu was described by PSA Robert Walkinshaw as being 'more aggressive, more demanding, and especially more confident that he and his subordinates can, given half the chance, do what is required'.[748] Both Walkinshaw and McDonald were convinced by Tu's argument that, as long as some Free World support persisted, the forces available to the government could maintain adequate levels of security in and around Phuoc Tuy's populated areas.

PSA Robert L. Walkinshaw shared this view, writing in late February that 'in realistic terms one would have to conclude that this province is keeping pace with the Vietnamisation timetable'.[749] Over the course of the month the

[746] Interview with BRIG McDonald, 12 July 1973, p. 4.
[747] First Secretary McKeown to Department of External Affairs, 'Biography of Lt Col Nguyen Van Tu', 17 February 1970; 201/1/15 PART 2 A4531, NAA..
[748] Robert L. Walkinshaw, 'Phuoc Tuy in Perspective', 28 February 1971, p. 2; Politics – Military Affairs File 1971, Container 1592, A1 731, RG472, NARA.
[749] Walkinshaw, 'Phuoc Tuy in Perspective', 28 February 1971, p. 1; Politics – Military Affairs File 1971, Container 1592, A1 731, RG472, NARA.

province forces had not only resumed control of the populated areas from 1ATF but also initiated Operation DONG KHOI ('Rise Up'), a maximum intensity effort involving all RF/PF units. Walkinshaw felt that the operation was a milestone in the Vietnamisation of Phuoc Tuy:

> It was glaringly evident that the military strategists of this province can, when given the opportunity, plan and execute operations with a minimum of Free World support. The Province Chief himself, the principle [sic] architect of the plan, is exuding an unusual confidence…one gets the impression that confidence is omnipresent. New attitudes are evolving; more care is being given to detail…some of the territorial forces are showing an unprecedented enthusiasm; and the PSD, the poor cousin of the province family, is showing signs of coming alive.[750]

Although acknowledging that 'weaknesses and shortcomings are just as evident as the strengths', Walkinshaw remained hopeful that 'the confident attitude, referred to above, will engender the corrective action which is needed to build viable institutions – institutions which enable the Vietnamese to carry on when Free World support is no longer available'.[751] Echoing this view, Australian Defence Minister Malcolm Fraser informed Parliament on 28 February of the handover of control to the RF/PF and that 'this is a story of success in the process of military Vietnamization'.[752] As was the case in Washington, the government in Canberra publicly insisted that troop withdrawals were justified by improvements on the ground in Phuoc Tuy, and were not being driven by domestic political considerations.

Walkinshaw's view, somewhat sardonically described as being 'substantiated by computer' in one Directory of Military Intelligence (DMI) report, was not shared by many Australian advisers, and indeed the Joint AFV/Embassy Group found his assessment of DONG KHOI so unbalanced that it felt compelled in its March report to warn Canberra of Walkinshaw's

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[750] Robert L. Walkinshaw, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy – Period Ending 28 February 1971', 28 February 1971, p. 1; Province Reports 1971, Container 1592, A1 731, RG472, NARA.
[751] Walkinshaw, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy', 28 February 1971, p. 1; Province Reports 1971, Container 1592, A1 731, RG472, NARA.
[752] *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates* House of Representatives Vol. 71, 24 February 1971, pp. 568–569, quoted in Frost, *Australia's War in Vietnam,* p. 149.

'continuing undue optimism', which it felt was 'misleading and unrealistic'.[753] A DMI assessment from early May noted that Walkinshaw's characterisation of Vietnamisation as 'on track' came despite less than 50 percent of RF/PF units in the province being rated 'adequate' under existing CORDS metrics. The report concluded that while 'the Phuoc Tuy Province Territorial Forces have progressed beyond the standard demonstrated during 1970 and earlier' they were 'by Australian standards…a long way from an acceptable standard of proficiency'.[754]

The problems that dogged the RF/PF were all too familiar after five years of advisory effort. The mentoring operations undertaken as part of CUNG CHUNG in the second half of 1970 had coaxed many RF units out of their static positions and into extended operations in the jungle and hills of Phuoc Tuy.[755] These operations were often compromised, however, by the inadequacy of the RVNAF logistics system. Advisers found that RF soldiers lacked basic items for extended jungle operations, such as enough water canteens, ration packs or solid fuel. Patrols either had to be ended after one or two days, or resupplied by helicopter or vehicle – compromising operational security and putting a further strain on province resources.[756] That such basic and easily fixable shortages existed despite the vast amounts invested in the RVNAF as part of Vietnamisation spoke, perhaps, to misguided priorities.

Leadership also remained uneven. The AATTV report for May stated that most RF company commanders were 'experienced officers with an adequate knowledge sufficient to carry out their task', but that they continued to lack aggression.[757] Ten out of 29 RF commanders were considered inadequate for the task, as were eleven of 63 PF platoon commanders. Moreover, RF/PF units

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[753] Joint AFV/Embassy Pacification Report for March, 13 April 1971; 35 AWM347.
[754] 'Progress in Upgrading the Territorial Forces in Phuoc Tuy Province' (Draft), 3 May 1971; 35 AWM347.
[755] Interview with MAJGEN W.G. Henderson, 22 March 1972, pp. 10–11.
[756] John F. Kwasigroch, 'Counter Guerilla Warfare Conference', 15 July 1971; Unknown Folder, Container 1591, A1 731, RG472, NARA and 'After Action Report: 655 RF Coy', 3 March 1971, pp. 3-4; R723/1/1 PART 2 AWM293.
[757] COL G.J. Leary, 'AATTV Monthly Report May 1971 Part Two', 10 June 1971, p. 15; 25 AWM293.

continued to try to reach statistical goals rather than mount meaningful operations. A DMI analysis put the ratio of contacts to operations at a staggering 11.5:1000. One adviser noted that there was 'an average of 100–120 ambush positions plotted on the map every night. If one percent of these ambushes were successful the results would speak for themselves.'[758]

Morale also remained a problem. The same adviser argued that this was because of statistics-driven operations:

> RF companies need to be put to the test but not on operations that have little or no tactical significance but rather to look good on some abstract graph in somebody's office. The average RF soldier must have reached the point of understanding the futility of most operations on which he is required to be a participant.[759]

A survey of two RF companies under training somewhat contradicted this view; 77 percent of the soldiers asked opposed large-scale operations into jungle base areas because of the risks involved.[760] The report also pointed to shortages in pay, leave and equipment as reasons for dissatisfaction. These shortages were in some cases due to administrative problems or the aforementioned logistical shortfalls, but in other cases were the result of corruption within units. Officers and NCOs would withhold pay, leave or equipment entitlements as a way of extorting private soldiers or simply profiteering.[761] These were problems that were the product of a deeply rooted institutional culture, one that was beyond the capacity of the advisory structure to change.

There also remained serious concerns among advisers about the quality of other security forces in Phuoc Tuy. As noted in Chapter Six, the recruiting and training of PSDF was a major objective of the pacification program from November 1968 onwards. By the end of February 1971 the nominal strength of the PDSF in Phuoc Tuy was around 43,000, an impressive figure given the

[758] Maj K. Phillips, 'Report by MAJ K. Phillips, Senior Australian Adviser Phuoc Tuy Province', Annex E to AATTV Report April 1971, p. 4; 24 AWM293.
[759] Phillips, 'Report by MAJ K. Phillips, Senior Australian Adviser Phuoc Tuy Province', Annex E to AATTV Report April 1971, p. 4; 24 AWM293.
[760] 'Thoughts of the RF in P.T.', 11 January 1971, p. 7; Pacification Study 1971, Container 1591, A1 731, RG472, NARA.
[761] 'Thoughts of the RF in P.T.', 11 January 1971, p. 3; Pacification Study 1971, Container 1591, A1 731, RG472, NARA.

province's overall population was only about 120,000.[762] In theory such a large force provided a chance to free up RF/PF units from static guard duty in hamlets and represented a powerful statement of political allegiance from the population towards the government. In light of this, and in line with previous efforts, it is not surprising that targeting the PSDF was a significant priority in Ba Long's planned winter-spring campaign.[763] Both US and Australian advisers saw this targeting of the PSDF (which ranged from propaganda to violence and kidnapping) as confirming the legitimacy and effectiveness of the program, with Walkinshaw writing in January 1971 that '[t]he increase in enemy propaganda efforts underlines the fact that the VC are concentrating on political loyalties of the people, and realize that the GVN efforts in the areas of PSDF and pacification constitute a threat to their power base.'[764]

The reality was more complex. Under the General Mobilization Law of June 1968, all fit males aged 16–17 and 39–50 years were required to enlist in the local PSDF, while women, youths (aged 7 and above) and the elderly could also volunteer. The first group, and women in the same age brackets, were expected to be armed and perform combat roles while all others were in 'support'.[765] This meant that the figures for total PSDF enrolments cited by CORDS reports were misleading. The situation in My Xuan hamlet illustrates the problem. Out of a total eligible population of 1809, My Xuan had a village roster of 690 PSDF. But just 70 of these were 'hardcore' – a CORDS euphemism for members who were eligible for a combat role and were considered sufficiently motivated or reliable to be armed – and of the 70 weapons issued, 11 were almost immediately stolen by the Front.[766] The remaining 620 PSDF members in the village were considered 'support' PSDF. The term 'support' gave an air of legitimacy to what province PSDF advisor W.M. McLaughlin argued was in

[762] Walkinshaw, 'Phuoc Tuy in Perspective', 28 February 1971, p. 2; Politics – Military Affairs File 1971, Container 1592, A1 731, RG472, NARA.
[763] 'Summary of VCI Activities 1–31 January 1971', 17 March 1971; 4 AWM347.
[764] Robert L. Walkinshaw, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy – Period ending 31 January 1971', 31 January 1971, p. 1; Province Reports 1971, Box 1592, A1 731, RG472, NARA.
[765] CAPT Hartley, 'Report by CAPT Hartley, PSDF Adviser Phuoc Tuy Sector Sep 70', undated, p. 1; Appendix 7 to Annex C, AATTV Report Sep 70; R723/1/57/25 AWM103.
[766] 'Phu My Village' in Warren H. Shiroma, 'PSDF Survey', 14 April 1971; PSDF, Container 1593, RG472, NARA.

essence a fraud: throughout the province, 'support' PSDF were not trained or even required to attend meetings. They were, in McLaughlin's opinion, 'mythical'.[767]

The nature of these figures brings into question the value of the PSDF as a political movement. In the eyes of CORDS and the South Vietnamese government, the raising of village militias was a key part of decentralising political power and giving villagers a stake in the RVN by democratising the defence of their own homes. CORDS official Stephen B. Young described the PSDF as a 'massive transfer of raw physical power' that 'placed the duty of national defence upon every citizen, male and female'.[768] But in practice many villagers appear to have viewed the PSDF as just another burden imposed on them by Saigon. A survey conducted in Phuoc Tuy in December 1970 found that 'most PSDF members do not think they must share in responsibility for the protection of their community and only think about their personal interests.'[769] Many members felt obliged to join and saw the exercise as a form of *de facto* conscription. The result was that the 'hardcore' members who would go on guard duty of an evening were 'those who are wanted by the VC, are politically ambitious, or are actually VCI'.[770]

The actual military efficacy of these 'hardcore' members was almost certainly minimal. An advisor found in September 1970 that 'the basic requirements of the PSDF to counter small unit incursions have not been taught', and that while members were generally familiar with their second-hand rifles, shooting was poor because of a lack of range practice.[771] On a deeper level, the same adviser called into question the entire militia concept. The PSDF were only supposed to deal with small parties of Front tax collectors or cadre;

[767] CAPT W.M. McLaughlin, 'Phuoc Tuy Province PSDF Adviser', undated, p. 67; Appendix 1 to Annex D, AATTV Report Aug 71, 28 AWM293.
[768] Young, 'Power Towards the People: Local Development in Vietnam, 1968–71', p. 83.
[769] 'PSDF in Five Villages of Phuoc Tuy Province', 17 December 1970, p. 1; Civil Affairs Report File 1, Box 1578, A1 731, RG472, NARA.
[770] CAPT Hartley, 'PSDF Adviser Phuoc Tuy Sector Sep 70', p. 3; Appendix 7 to Annex C, AATTV Report Sep 70; R723/1/57/25 AWM103.
[771] CAPT Hartley, 'PSDF Adviser Phuoc Tuy Sector Sep 70', p. 2; Appendix 7 to Annex C, AATTV Report Sep 70; R723/1/57/25 AWM103.

anything bigger was to be handled by the RF/PF. But in practice it was hard to differentiate a small group of local cadre from the advanced party of a district company or D445, and there was no guarantee that local Territorial Forces would react. This sentiment was shared by the PSDF members surveyed in December 1970:

> To compare us with RF/PF soldiers, there is a big difference. Their weapons are as good and modern as those of the enemy while ours are in poor condition, plus we do not have sufficient training. How can we be assured that we can defeat the enemy?[772]

This objection went to the heart of the entire hamlet militia concept. Proponents of it, such as William Colby, implied that individual villagers would, if given the chance, defend themselves and their homes against the Front. The experience in Phuoc Tuy suggests this was generally not the case.

Alongside the RF/PF and the PSDF, the Phoenix program was the third and final component of the security measure designed to keep Phuoc Tuy safe in the absence of 1ATF. It remained, three years after its introduction, the most disappointing program in the province. Just as the emphasis on filling quotas had led to a moribund ambushing program, so too the steady stream of high-ranking Front members killed or captured by 1ATF had disguised the stagnant nature of Phung Hoang. The December 1970 PSA report explained the primary reason for the significant drop in anti-infrastructure neutralisations for that month as being due to the lack of 'fortuitous capture or rallying of a significant VCI, as in the previous period.' It went on to state:

> Specific targeting of VCI is still in the embryonic stage and the government agencies still are best at reacting to immediate intelligence and not at the patient and frequently unrewarding effort of specific targeting.[773]

[772] 'PSDF in Province: Five Villages of Phuoc Tuy', 17 December 1970, p. 3; Civil Affairs Report File 1, Box 1578, A1 731, RG472, NARA.
[773] Robert L. Walkinshaw, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy – Period ending 31 December 1970', 31 December 1971, p. 2; Pacification Study Files 1970, Box 1584, A1 731, RG472, NARA.

That specific targeting could be described as 'embryonic' three years after Phoenix began in Phuoc Tuy, and after 1ATF 'Acorn' operations proved the efficacy of the concept, was a sad reflection on both the program and the advisory effort, a fact Walkinshaw acknowledged.[774]

In light of this, it is obvious to ask why the Phoenix program remained so ineffective in Phuoc Tuy. The answer, as was so often the case, was leadership. The head of Phoenix in the province was described as an 'inept neophyte', and he was relieved in March 1971.[775] His replacement, Major Minh, was reported to be 'performing beyond the best expectations' by 'attempting to rebuild a viable organization from a solid base in the village to an efficient structure at province'.[776] While this could be dismissed as the over-optimism that so often appeared after a leadership change, Minh appeared to have had some success. While the province was still considered an underperformer by CORDS, the monthly neutralisation target, reduced from an 'impossible' 32 to 10 in March, was exceeded in April, July, August, September and October.[777]

Many of the neutralisations made during these months remained the by-product of routine military action unconnected to the Phoenix program, or the sentencing of Front 'suppliers' who were not considered members of the VCI proper. Nonetheless, both targeted neutralisations and the follow-up of generated intelligence improved under Major Minh. An example of this occurred in October, when an RF company in Duc Thanh ambushed and captured two Chau Duc district cadre. After being quickly interrogated with the information provided by the dossiers maintained by the DIOCC, the cadre revealed the location of their base camp. This led to an attack by the RF

[774] Walkinshaw, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy', 31 December 1971, p. 2; Pacification Study Files 1970, Box 1584, A1 731, RG472, NARA.
[775] Robert L. Walkinshaw, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy – Period ending 31 March 1971', 31 March 1971, p. 1; Province Reports 1971, Box 1592, A1 731, RG472, NARA.
[776] Robert L. Walkinshaw, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy – Period Ending 30 April 1971', 30 April 1971, pp. 2–3; Province Reports 1971, Box 1592, A1 731, RG472, NARA.
[777] Raymond L. Perkins, 'Fact Sheet on PHUNG HOANG Program Phuoc Tuy Province', 17 September 1971, p. 1; PSA Letters 1971, Box 1591, A1 731, RG472, NARA; Raymond L. Perkins, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy – Period Ending 30 September 1971', 30 September 1971, p. 1, and Raymond L. Perkins, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy – Period Ending 31 October 1971', 4 November 1971, p. 2; both in Province Reports 1971, Box 1592, A1 731, RG472, NARA.

company that killed five high-ranking VCI and captured two more. The five killed were the Chau Duc party chapter secretary (PCS), the Baria subregion Chief of Staff, the Baria Security Chief and his Deputy and the Ngai Giao PCS. In addition to these deaths, the two captured cadre revealed the identity of twelve 'legal' VCI in Suoi Nghe, who were subsequently arrested.[778]

Yet as was so often the case, the improvements in the program remained temporary. In November Major Minh was posted to a four-month staff course, leaving a lowly first lieutenant in charge. This revealed the continuing weaknesses in the program. District programs were understaffed, and often contained personnel – including district chiefs – who remained uninterested in Phung Hoang.[779] Within a month, the PSA was reporting that:

> Phung Hoang activity fell to rock bottom with total neutralizations consisting of two Hoi Chanhs. The Province Chief managed to hold two Phung Hoang province meetings during the month, which were filled with the usual hortatory injunction for the future and verbal chastisement for the past.[780]

As will be seen in the next chapter, the stagnation of Phung Hoang came at a critical time, as the VCI geared up to support another military campaign. Once again, the best efforts of Australian, American and South Vietnamese individuals had been unable to overcome the institutional inertia within Phung Hoang.

As noted in the previous chapter, 1971 was the year in which the political reforms initiated as part of pacification reached their climax in South Vietnam. The Lower House elections in August and the Presidential election in October were the culmination of a process that had begun with the election of a National Constituent Assembly in 1966. Between then and the end of 1971, as Theresa A. Tull put it, 'the average Vietnamese…voted for his hamlet chief, his village council, his provincial or municipal council, twice selected an entire

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[778] Perkins, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy', 4 November 1971, p. 2; Province Reports 1971, Box 1592, A1 731, RG472, NARA.
[779] Raymond L. Perkins, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy – Period Ending 30 November 1971', 5 December 1971, p. 2; Province Reports 1971, Box 1592, A1 731, RG472, NARA.
[780] Raymond L. Perkins, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy – Period Ending 31 December 1971', 4 January 1972, p. 2; Province Reports 1971, Box 1592, A1 731, RG472, NARA.

Lower House of the National Assembly, elected an initial sixty-man Senate for the National Assembly and initiated the triennial replacement of one-half of that body, and twice voted for a president and vice-president'.[781] This was, by any standard, a high level of democratic engagement – and an almost total departure from decades of autocratic rule under first the French and then Diem.

As discussed in Chapter Two and Chapter Four, this avalanche of democracy was designed to achieve a number of goals. Elections served to give legitimacy to the South Vietnamese government both domestically and internationally. This was particularly important for the American government, which continued to frame the war as a fight between freedom and totalitarianism.[782] At the same time, democratic elections were seen as a way of both involving villagers in politics and improving the quality of governance. 'In a fundamental sense,' CORDS local government adviser Stephen B. Young wrote in 1974, 'the people were outside the system, which was nearly a closed corporate entity.'[783] Voting thus encouraged broader participation but also provided a basic performance incentive for officials at all levels: service the needs of the population, or lose your job in the next elections.[784]

As was so often the case, the effects of political reform were more complex in Phuoc Tuy than officials in either Washington or Saigon anticipated. The role of elections in increasing political participation in the province was a case in point. By the most basic measure available, turnout of registered voters on election day, elections succeeded in engaging the interest of the population in politics. As Table 1 shows, at all five national elections between 1967 and 1971 voter turnout was high and always exceeded the national average:

[781] Tull, 'Broadening the Base', p. 35.
[782] Sorley, *A Better War*, p. 279.
[783] Stephen B. Young, 'Power Towards the People: Local Development in Vietnam, 1968–71', p. 81.
[784] Tull, 'Broadening the Base', pp. 35–36.

Table 1: Voter turnout in national elections, 1967–71[785]

Election	Eligible voter turnout – Phuoc Tuy (%)	Eligible voter turnout – national (%)
1967 Presidential	90	83
1971 Presidential	96.1	87.9
1970 Senatorial	75.5	65.4
1967 Lower House	90	72.9
1971 Lower House	87.2	78.5

These were impressive numbers, particularly given the Front's routine threats against polling places and voters during elections.[786]

At the same time, however, advisers often questioned the extent to which villagers actively engaged with the political process rather than just voting out of a sense of duty. PSA Walkinshaw summed up this view in November 1970:

> Most of the people of Phuoc Tuy are what some people call "simple" villagers. They are not, and never have been, politically-oriented: nor are they dedicated to any particular cause other than trying to earn a living from the soil … Apart from those who are fanatically associated with the VC, or those whose livelihood is dependent on loyalty to a particular political party, Phuoc Tuyians are not really interested in political matters except to participate in elections.[787]

It was certainly true that active participation in politics remained the domain of the professional class in Phuoc Tuy. The membership of the handful of political

[785] Data for national turnouts from Tull, 'Broadening the Base', pp. 38-48. Data for Phuoc Tuy: 1967 Presidential and Lower House elections from McNeill and Ekins, *On the Offensive,* p. 243. Data for the 1970 Senatorial election from Martin S. Christie, 'Observations of National Senatorial Elections in Phuoc Tuy Province on 31 August 1970', 7 September 1970, p. 3; Politics – Military Affairs – Files – 1970, Box 1585, A1 731, RG472, NARA. Data for the 1971 Presidential election: Raymond L. Perkins, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy – Period Ending 31 October 1971', 4 November 1971, p. 1; Province Reports 1971, Box 1592, A1 731, RG472, NARA. Data for the Lower House election: 'Joint AFV/Embassy Pacification Report for August', 14 September 1971; 35 AWM347.

[786] Raymond L. Perkins, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy – Period Ending 30 September 1971', 30 September 1971, p. 1; Province Reports 1971, Box 1592, A1 731, RG472, NARA.

[787] Robert L. Walkinshaw, 'Popular Political Sympathies', 23 November 1970, p. 1; Politics – Military Affairs 1970, Box 1585, A1 731, RG472, NARA.

parties active in the province were dominated by civil servants, military officers and businessmen.[788] Table 2 shows how this dominance flowed into the candidates who ran for office, in this case for the Province Council.

Table 2: Candidates for Province Council by profession, 1970[789]

	Dat Do	**Long Le**	**Long Dien**	**Xuyen Moc**	**Duc Thanh**	**Elected**
Teacher		2	3		1	2
ARVN officer	1	1		1	1	2
Businessman	1	1	4	1	1	1
Civil Servant	1					
Police Officer		1				
RD Cadre	1					1
Other		4	2			1

As can be seen, there was little direct representation for the farmers, fishermen and manual labourers who were the majority of the province's population, suggesting that Walkinshaw's portrait of a disengaged electorate had some validity.

Yet voting within the 1970 Senate and 1971 Lower House elections showed that, while the electorate largely spurned involvement in organised politics, they nonetheless made informed decisions on who to vote for. In the 1970 Senate elections, voters did not pick individual candidates from provinces or states (as in the US or Australia) but instead voted for three of 16 nationwide slates, each of which had ten members. The three slates with the highest

[788] Robert L. Walkinshaw, 'Political Forces and Leading Personalities Working in Phuoc Tuy', 14 December 1970, Politics – Military Affairs – Files – 1970, Box 1585, A1 731, RG472, NARA. See also 'Activities of the Nhan Xa Party in Phuoc Tuy', 11 February 1970, p. 2; Local Survey Report 1970, Box 1583, A1 731, RG472, NARA.
[789] LTCOL John J. Bacci, 'Province Council Elections', 25 May 1970, Village and Hamlet Administration 1970, Box 1580, A1 731, RG472, NARA.

number of votes nationwide sat their ten members in Senate.[790] Slates were either loose coalitions of prominent politicians or were drawn from existing political parties, and represented a variety of political positions. Slates 1, 6 and 16 were pro-Thieu, whereas slate 3 was considered anti-communist but not aligned with Thieu.[791] Although the RVN Constitution banned neutralist or communist candidates and parties from participating in elections, slate 11, consisting of An Quang Buddhists, was allowed to run. Headed by former Foreign Minister Vu Van Mau, the slate campaigned on a platform of 'peace through compromise' and represented the only real deviation in the election from solid anti-communism.[792] When voters went to the polls on 30 August 1970, they had a range of distinct choices available.

In Phuoc Tuy, slates 1, 3 and 6 won. Slate 11, which won nationally, finished fourth.[793] As this result suggests, distinct voting patterns emerged within the province. In the Catholic communities of Binh Gia and Phuoc Tinh, voters overwhelmingly chose slates 1, 3 and 6, as they were all pro-government and had a high representation of Catholics. In larger villages such as Baria and Long Dien, there was a more even distribution of votes, although 1, 3 and 6 were still in the majority. In Dat Do district, however, slate 11 was a clear winner – a reflection perhaps not only of lingering support for the Front but also a growing war-weariness in a district which had seen heavy fighting over the previous three years.[794] In smaller villages throughout the province the pattern of voting tended to swing away from the winning slates, with slate 11 often the highest individual total.[795] While the reasons voting patterns differed from village to village and district to district can only be speculated on, the fact

[790] Tull, 'Broadening the Base', pp. 41–43.
[791] T.S. Jones, Untitled (Annotated in pen: 'Senate Lists'), undated, Politics – Military Affairs – Files 1970, Box 1585, A1 731, RG472, NARA; Tull, 'Broadening the Base', pp. 43–44.
[792] Alvin Shuster, 'Buddhist Slate Appears to Win 10 Seats in Saigon Senate Race', *New York Times,* 1 September 1970.
[793] 'Results of the Senatorial Election on August 30 1970', Politics – Military Affairs – Files 1970, Box 1585, A1 731, RG472, NARA. National results Tull, 'Broadening the Base', p. 46.
[794] 'Results of the Senatorial Election on August 30 1970', Politics – Military Affairs – Files 1970, Box 1585, A1 731, RG472, NARA.
[795] See 'Senatorial Election Charts', undated, Politics – Military Affairs – Files 1970, Box 1585, A1 731, RG472, NARA.

they did so is clear evidence that Phuoc Tuy's electorate was engaging with the political process and not simply voting out of a sense of duty.

This distribution of votes was replicated in the lower house election in August 1971. Many of the political parties which had featured in the Senate race a year earlier put forward candidates, including the Nhan Xa Party, Catholic parties such as the Greater Solidarity Force, and the Nationalist Salvation Front, which under the leadership of Senator Tran Van Don represented the strongest locus of anti-Thieu, pro-Republican feeling.[796] The contest rapidly came down to two candidates, however: the Thieu-backed Lieutenant Colonel Vu Van Quy and independent Huyhn Van Nguyen. Like incumbent Major Linh, Quy was a serving ARVN officer born in North Vietnam. In contrast, Nguyen was a former Popular Forces soldier who had been elected to the Province Council a year earlier. Informally aligned with the An Quang Buddhists, Nguyen actively courted controversy. He had publicised Australian traffic accidents, American manslaughter cases and the poor state of the Phuoc Tuy police in Saigon newspapers, endorsed Ky for the presidency and stated he would rather work with the Chinese and Russians than the Americans – earning him a formal rebuke from the Council.[797]

Although detailed data does not exist, the basic results of the election are clear. Twenty candidates contested the vote, with Nguyen winning the contest with approximately a quarter of the 43,000 votes (87.2 percent of registered voters). Quy finished second, just 300 votes behind. Overnight, however, officials in Duc Thanh changed the results so that Quy squeaked home by 25. It was, the PSA stated, 'an incredibly clumsy effort, which resulted in court action, and fines and suspensions for election officials in Duc Thanh district'.'[798] Nguyen's court action was successful, with both the Court of Appeal and

[796] A list of possible candidates and a brief description of each is in 'Joint AFV/Embassy Pacification Report for February', 15 March 1971; 35 AWM347.
[797] 'Joint AFV/Embassy Pacification Report for February', 15 March 1971; 35 AWM347 and Raymond L. Perkins, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy – Period ending 31 August 1971', 31 August 1971, p. 1; Province Reports 1971, Box 1592, A1 731, RG472, NARA.
[798] Perkins, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy', 31 August 1971, p. 1; Province Reports 1971, Box 1592, A1 731, RG472, NARA.

Supreme Court confirming the fraudulent nature of the election result. However, in South Vietnamese politics possession was very much nine-tenths of the law; the Lower House had the power to confirm Quy as the winner regardless of the fraud, which it duly proceeded to do. Nguyen declined to pursue the matter, while the officials responsible were convicted and jailed.[799]

Although the August 1971 election was the only time the rigging of elections was publicly confirmed in Phuoc Tuy, allegations of electoral malfeasance were almost routine in the province. Advisers were told repeatedly that local RF/PF had been urged to vote for slates 1, 6 and 16 in the August 1970 Senate election by local officials. Although they found 'there was no evidence of "pressure" from Saigon', advisers argued there did not need to be: 'the Province Local Administration Chief mentioned with a wink that only the blind and the deaf don't know that the GVN was pushing slates 1, 6 and 16.'[800] A month earlier during the Province Council elections, officials had been suspended in Long Le for improper interference, and advisers suspected but could not prove that the corrupt activities ran much deeper than the suspensions suggested. Allegations such as these undoubtedly contributed to a sizeable cynicism on the part of the populace in Phuoc Tuy about their new democratic institutions. A survey of voters in the lead-up to the March 1970 village council elections found that those outside Baria, Long Hai and the Catholic villages of Phuoc Tinh and Binh Gia 'had little interest in the coming election on 22 March 1970 because they believed that the positions of the officials were prearranged before election'.[801]

This cynicism was undoubtedly reinforced by the October 1971 Presidential election, which President Thieu won unopposed. Thieu approached the race determined to retain power ahead of his two biggest rivals within the

[799] Raymond L. Perkins, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy – Period ending 30 September 1971', 30 September 1971, p. 1; Province Reports 1971, Box 1592, A1 731, RG472, NARA.
[800] Martin S. Christie, 'Observations of National Senatorial Elections in Phuoc Tuy Province on 31 August 1970', 7 September 1970, p. 2; Politics – Military Affairs 1970, Box 1585, A1 731, RG472, NARA.
[801] 'Village Election in Phuoc Tuy, 22 March 1970', 14 May 1970, Civil Affairs 1970 (1), Box 1578, A1 731, RG472, NARA.

military, former Prime Minister and current Vice President Nguyen Cao Ky and General Duong Van 'Big' Minh. He was also determined to prevent the emergence of a 'peace' or 'compromise' candidate such as Truong Dinh Dzu, a Saigon lawyer who had finished second in the 1967 Presidential election running on a platform that advocated a cessation of the bombing of the DRV and an immediate start to negotiations. To this end, Thieu introduced a new electoral law that required Presidential candidates to be endorsed by at least 100 members of province councils or 40 members of the National Assembly. He quickly proceeded to acquire the signatures of most of the assembly and 452 out of 550 province councillors in an effort to prevent Ky from contesting the election. After the Supreme Court ruled that Ky's candidacy was not legal, as some the 102 province councillors who had pledged their allegiance to him had previously signed for Thieu, both Ky and 'Big' Minh withdrew from the race, protesting that they did not believe it to be fair.[802]

Suddenly unopposed, Thieu was re-elected with 94.3 percent of the vote. In an effort to avoid the election descending into farce after the withdrawal of his opponents, Thieu had recast the vote as a referendum on his conduct of the war: if voters were unhappy with his hardline stance against compromise with the Front or the DRV, they were either to boycott the election or deface their ballots. The high turnout (87.9 percent of eligible voters) and the low rate of informal votes seemed to deliver a resounding victory for Thieu.[803] Yet the campaign had showed Thieu's willingness to manipulate democratic institutions to achieve the result he desired, eroding the perceived legitimacy of his government internationally as well as domestically. This was a serious miscalculation on Thieu's part for, as contemporary observers strongly argued, he almost certainly would have won a fair contest against Ky, Minh, or any peace candidate that emerged.[804] Yet Thieu's efforts to exclude candidates from the race alienated many opposition politicians in the National Assembly and

[802] Kirk, 'Presidential Campaign Politics', pp. 64–65.
[803] Tull, 'Broadening the Base', p. 40.
[804] Kirk, 'Presidential Campaign Politics', pp. 64–65.

elsewhere who, while not directly supporting Thieu himself, agreed with the President's basic no-compromise approach to the conduct of the war.[805]

Moreover, the size of Thieu's victory troubled many. In Phuoc Tuy, 53,206 people (96.1 percent of registered voters) voted, with 50,607 (95.1 percent) of votes going to Thieu.[806] This was the highest voter turnout in any province-wide election between 1967 and 1971, which made the high percentage of votes for Thieu even more unusual. As both the Lower House election in August and the Senate elections of 1970 had shown, a significant minority of voters in Phuoc Tuy were prepared to turn out to vote for candidates who opposed Thieu's no-compromise program. That these same voters turned out just one month later but then voted overwhelmingly for Thieu raised suspicions among advisers. 'There were some indications that the true turnout was something less than the 87 percent registered in the August Lower House elections,' PSA Raymond L. Perkins wrote in October. This suspicion of (comparatively minor) vote inflation existed nationwide, with widespread reports that local police and officials stuffed ballot boxes in urban areas where support for Thieu was often low.[807] While few seriously doubted that Thieu would have won anyway, the decisive mandate the 1971 election delivered was perhaps not entirely legitimate.

Overall, the elections of 1970–71 suggest two things about the progress of pacification in Phuoc Tuy. The first is that on the eve of US and Australian withdrawal from the province, there existed a broad base of political support for the RVN in Phuoc Tuy. While voters did not necessarily approve of the Thieu government, the alternatives the majority voted for did not seriously contest core issues such as the need for an independent, non-communist South Vietnam. Equally, the wide distribution of votes across candidates, platforms and parties suggests that the political reforms instituted after 1967 did succeed in getting Phuoc Tuy's population actively engaged with the political process.

[805] Kirk, 'Presidential Campaign Politics', pp. 56–57.
[806] Perkins, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy', 4 November 1971, p. 1; Province Reports 1971, Box 1592, A1 731, RG472, NARA.
[807] Perkins, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy', 4 November 1971, p. 1; Province Reports 1971, Box 1592, A1 731, RG472, NARA.

On the other hand, the consistent success of An Quang-affiliated candidates shows that there was a significant minority in Phuoc Tuy who opposed President Thieu's platform of no-compromises with the Front. Whether this was an expression of war-weariness and a desire for peace, or of active support for the Front, remains impossible to say – although it should be noted that the Front repeatedly instructed its supporters not to vote, as it recognised that the mere act of going to the polls gave a certain legitimacy to the RVN.

Yet while elections gave some insight into the political allegiance of Phuoc Tuy's population, they also showed the failure of political reform as a mechanism for pacification. Democratic reforms and the elections they led to were supposed to generate support for the RVN by giving the government legitimacy in the eyes of the people and making it more accountable towards them. But the consistent trend within elections in both Phuoc Tuy and South Vietnam as a whole was that their results were accepted only as long as they were not too harmful to the interests of the military.[808] Although a veneer of civil government existed, real power continued to rest within the RVNAF – a basic fact demonstrated by the continued occupation of the positions of province and district chiefs by ARVN officers. Popular support for the RVN was never generated through elections in Phuoc Tuy; instead, participation in elections almost certainly reflected existing support generated through other measures.

August also saw the announcement of the final withdrawal of 1ATF from Phuoc Tuy. The bulk of the Task Force would be home by Christmas, with residual stores and equipment to be removed from the Australian logistics base in Vung Tau by early 1972. A reduced advisory presence would be retained in Phuoc Tuy. Initial Defence planning had anticipated a withdrawal by mid-1972, with the infantry battalions being withdrawn as their tours came to an end. But the disclosure in July that President Nixon intended to visit China suggested to Cabinet that US disengagement was imminent, which in turn changed the political calculations of Australian withdrawal. Having already been publicly

[808] Kirk, 'Presidential Campaign Politics', p. 71.

blindsided by the Nixon Administration on the question of troop withdrawals in 1969, the government was anxious not be caught napping again. When Defence advised that the earliest possible time for total withdrawal was by December 1971, Cabinet quickly came to a decision. Prime Minister William McMahon announced the withdrawal on 18 August.[809]

The sudden announcement of 1ATF's withdrawal came as something of a surprise, despite the fact that province authorities and advisers had been preparing for a post-Task Force future for some time.[810] It has already been noted that by early 1971 Province Chief Tu was confident of the ability of the forces under his command to take on greater responsibility and maintain security in the province as Australian force withdrawals continued. Both PSA Walkinshaw and analysts within DMI shared this assessment, but their views came with a number of caveats. Walkinshaw wrote in February that '[i]t would be fatuous indeed to suggest that the Vietnamese are now ready to go it alone', and that 'the Vietnamese themselves, including the Province Chief, are fully cognizant of this'.[811] Tu's confidence stemmed from the belief that force reductions would follow the pattern set by the withdrawal of 8RAR, with battalions not being replaced at the end of their tour; province forces would still be able to draw on Free World logistic and fire support.[812] DMI had taken a similar attitude in a May assessment, stating that Vietnamese plans for replacing 1ATF in the province were feasible provided logistic support was adequate and Free World forces assisted in the transition.[813]

The decision to withdraw 1ATF quickly and the continued drawdown in US troops meant that these criteria would go unfulfilled, but Tu remained confident in the ability of the men at his disposal. Advisers did not share this

[809] McNeill and Ekins, *Fighting to the Finish*, pp. 602–603.
[810] Perkins, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy', 31 August 1971, p. 1; Province Reports 1971, Box 1592, A1 731, RG472, NARA.
[811] Walkinshaw, 'Phuoc Tuy in Perspective', 28 February 1971, p. 2; Politics – Military Affairs File 1971, Container 1592, A1 731, RG472, NARA.
[812] Walkinshaw, 'Phuoc Tuy in Perspective', 28 February 1971, p. 2; Politics – Military Affairs File 1971, Container 1592, A1 731, RG472, NARA.
[813] 'Replacement of FWMAF Operating in Phuoc Tuy Province', 14 May 1971, 35 AWM347.

confidence. The Joint AFV/Embassy Pacification Group wrote in their August report:

> the lack of warning will not aid the Territorial Force to assume greater responsibility for the security of the Province, particularly in the Clearing Zone, after the departure of 1ATF. Their ability to do so is a matter for conjecture but the continuing high level of tax/terrorist incidents, evidence of increasing incursions into hamlets and the successful ambush of the Long Le District Chief in Baria would seem to justify the pessimists.[814]

Confidence was eroded even further during September, as Operation IVANHOE produced a final, heavy clash between the Task Force and 33 PAVN Regiment on Phuoc Tuy's northern border. Although the North Vietnamese withdrew, PSA Raymond L. Perkins was right in saying the fighting 'was doubtless a foretaste of the post-ATF future'.[815] Even the most optimistic outlooks assumed that ARVN units would be required to deal with PAVN/PLAF main force unit incursions into the province, but it seemed unlikely that the overstretched 18th ARVN Division would be able to provide assistance once the Task Force had withdrawn. The AFV/Embassy group concluded their monthly report with a blunt assessment: 'In the committee's view, all indications are that the security situation in Phuoc Tuy will deteriorate with the departure of 1ATF.'[816]

On Sunday, 7 November, 1ATF formally left its base at Nui Dat. 3RAR had departed Vietnam in mid-October, leaving 4RAR/NZ and various support and logistic units to move to Vung Tau in preparation for withdrawal. The bulk of these units left Vung Tau in early December, with the remainder finally departing Vietnam on 29 February 1972.[817] Task Force participation in pacification in Phuoc Tuy had ended, with security now the sole responsibility of South Vietnamese forces. This was a part of a process unfolding across the country; by the end of 1971 just 184,000 American troops were left in Vietnam,

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[814] 'Joint AFV/Embassy Pacification Report for August', 14 September 1971; 35 AWM347.
[815] Perkins, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy', 30 September 1971, p. 1; Province Reports 1971, Box 1592, A1 731, RG472, NARA.
[816] 'Joint AFV/Embassy Pacification Report for September', 12 October 1971; 35 AWM347.
[817] McNeill and Ekins, *Fighting to the Finish,* pp. 631–640.

with a further 45,000 withdrawn by the end of January 1972.[818] The ring of US bases and units in neighbouring Bien Hoa and Long Khanh provinces that had previously shielded Phuoc Tuy were gone, with the 3d Brigade 1st Cavalry Division the only major American combat formation left in Military Region 3.[819]

As the introduction to this chapter suggests, 1971 was supposed to be the year in which the policies put in place by President Nixon in the wake of his election in November 1968 to disengage the US from Vietnam began to bear fruit. Building on its successful operations in Cambodia and elsewhere over the course of 1970, the RVNAF was to continue to replace US and other Free World units in combat roles across the country, allowing the withdrawal of those units to occur. Behind this strengthening Vietnamese shield, the focus of pacification shifted from control to consolidation. US and Vietnamese authorities hoped that the elections scheduled for 1971 would, along with the economic reforms explored in the previous chapter, solidify the legitimacy of not just the Thieu government but the entire Republic of Vietnam. With an elected and responsive government, a growing economy, diminishing rural inequality, and an improving military, the RVN would by the end of 1971 be well on its way to defeating the threat posed by the Front and the DRV.

This sequence of events was also supposed to play out in Phuoc Tuy. Yet, as we have seen, events did not quite follow the script. The results of the 1971 Lower House election confirmed, as had the Senatorial election of the previous year, the existence of a broad base of support for the Republic throughout Phuoc Tuy. While these supporters were not necessarily pro-Thieu, they consistently voted for candidates who supported the President's conduct of the war and who opposed compromise with the Front or the DRV. At the same time, a sizeable minority in the province was also prepared to vote for candidates who held positions that were not only anti-Thieu but also on the very edge of what was publicly and legally acceptable in the RVN. Thus while the elections succeeded in driving general participation in the political process, they also

[818] Clarke, *Advice and Support,* p. 524.
[819] In January 1970 the term 'Corps Tactical Zones' had been replaced by 'Military Regions'. MR3 conformed to the old boundaries of IIICTZ. McNeill and Ekins, *Fighting to the Finish,* p. 435.

showed the continuing political divisions within Phuoc Tuy. Pacification clearly had not yet fully succeeded in addressing the grievances that drove opposition to the government in the countryside.

The 1971 elections also showed the limitations of this reform process. As both the Presidential election nationwide and the fixed result in the Lower House election in Phuoc Tuy demonstrated, real power in the country still lay with the military and the government bureaucracy it controlled. From Thieu downwards, the RVNAF were prepared to use electoral mechanisms but would override them if the desired results were not achieved. This reality clearly limited the extent to which elections could be used to build support among the rural populace. Although they participated in elections, many in Phuoc Tuy were clearly cynical about the extent to which their choices would ultimately matter – a cynicism more than justified by the events of August 1971 in particular.

The state of Phuoc Tuy's Territorial Forces by the end of 1971 also called into question the optimistic forecasts on which Vietnamisation, and the withdrawal of 1ATF from the province in particular, were based. While Lieutenant Colonel Tu was bullish about the province's prospects post-Task Force, few advisers shared his confidence. While there had undoubtedly been improvement in some RF/PF units, the problems that had dogged the Territorials for so long – poor leadership, inadequate logistics, improper training, poor motivation – had not been addressed at the root. The likelihood that the RF/PF would regress as the advisory presence in the provinces was reduced seemed high. The success of 1ATF in holding the PLAF and PAVN main force units assembled on the province's northern border away from the populated areas meant that, for the time being, the quality of the Territorials was not tested. Yet the very presence of these Communist units on Phuoc Tuy's fringes was a clear indication that this test would eventually come. In the event, and as the next chapter will examine, it would take just six months after the withdrawal of 1ATF for another massive offensive to hit Phuoc Tuy.

Chapter 10. 'Bereft of Their Australian Strongmen'.

November 1971–January 1973.[820]

The final fourteen months of the Australian and American advisory presence in Phuoc Tuy were defined by the 'war for peace', as both the United States and the Communists tried to achieve peace on their own terms.[821] In Hanoi, Le Duan and his coterie of 'Southerners' retained their faith in the model of the 'General Offensive-General Uprising' that had driven Party strategy prior to 1969. They believed that a renewed offensive, this time relying on PAVN regulars rather than PLAF guerrillas, could cripple the ARVN and lead to the toppling of the Thieu government by a general uprising – leaving the US with a *fait accompli* at the negotiating table in Paris. This offensive, named for victorious 18th century warlord Nguyen Hue, was launched in late March 1972. Although the offensive was initially a success, it was gradually stopped by a combination of South Vietnamese troops and US airpower. The clear failure of the Nguyen Hue meant that from July onwards, the United States held the upper hand in the Paris peace negotiations. Violence continued throughout South Vietnam as both the Front and the RVN tried to maximise their control of territory in the face of an anticipated ceasefire. This eventually arrived on 28 January, 1973, but only after President Nixon used US airpower to bludgeon the leadership of the VWP into accepting US terms. With the formal signing of the Paris Peace Accords in February, Nixon achieved one of his major foreign policy goals: disengaging the United States from Southeast Asia. For the US, at least, the war in Vietnam was over.

[820] Presentation to Ambassador, undated [late 1972], pp. 17-18; Box 4, A1 488 Province Profiles – Phuoc Tuy, RG 472, NARA.
[821] Nguyen, *Hanoi's War,* p. 257.

The impact of this strategic and diplomatic manoeuvring on events in Phuoc Tuy was profound. The Nguyen Hue offensive, which was fought in Phuoc Tuy between May and July, was the test of pacification and Vietnamisation that had been anticipated ever since 1ATF's withdrawal from the province in 1971 had been announced. 'Bereft of their Australian strongmen,' as one adviser put it, Phuoc Tuy faced a Communist onslaught that dwarfed all previous fighting in the province in both intensity and duration.[822] Although the offensive was eventually defeated in the province, as it was all over South Vietnam, the outcome of the 'test' proved ambiguous. As in 1968, the scale of the destruction caused by the Front's activities alienated many villagers, and seemed to confirm the Front's growing political marginalisation. At the same time, however, the fighting once again exposed deep-rooted problems of corruption and incompetence within the province government. By the start of 1973 pacification's progress was once again juxtaposed against issues that had remained constant in the province since 1966.

The period covered in this chapter was critical not only because it 'tested' pacification in Phuoc Tuy but also because it marked the end of US and Australian involvement in the province. After the withdrawal of 1ATF, an Australian advisory presence had remained, although their chief concern was with the training of Cambodian troops in a centre next to Long Hai village. The Whitlam Labor government, elected in November 1972 in part on a platform that guaranteed an end to Australian involvement in Vietnam, promptly withdrew the remaining Australian advisers in December that year. The American advisers of Team 89 left several months later, after the signing of the Paris Peace Accords. Although the struggle between the RVN and the Communists for control of Phuoc Tuy (and all of South Vietnam) would continue after February 1973, the withdrawal of the advisory presence in many ways marked the end of pacification as a distinct program in Phuoc Tuy.

The immediate roots of the fighting that engulfed South Vietnam over the course of 1972 lay in Operation LAM SON 719, an offensive undertaken by

[822] Presentation to Ambassador, undated [late 1972], pp. 17–18; Box 4, A1 488, RG 472, NARA.

the RVNAF into Laos in February 1971.[823] In a narrow sense, the objective of LAM SON 719 was to replicate the success the joint US and Vietnamese operations into Cambodia had achieved a year earlier in March 1970. Three South Vietnamese divisions were to attack across the border into Laos and occupy the town of Tchepone for ninety days, cutting the Ho Chi Minh trail and disrupting Communist logistics throughout Vietnam. Yet LAM SON 719 was also supposed to have a significant political impact. A successful execution of the operation, conducted primarily by the RVNAF, would demonstrate to domestic audiences in Vietnam and the US that Vietnamisation was working and that the RVN would be able to survive after the withdrawal of US troops. President Nixon also hoped that the offensive would send a clear signal to the VWP leadership that, despite ongoing US withdrawals, he remained committed to supporting an independent South Vietnam.[824]

In the event, LAM SON 719 had the opposite effect to all those intended. A stuttering advance to Tchepone was followed by a hasty retreat that turned into a full-blown rout. By the time the operation ended on 6 April 1971, after forty-five days of operations in Laos, the South Vietnamese had suffered over 9,000 casualties.[825] Many of the problems that had plagued the RVNAF for over a decade were on full display. Poor operational security meant that the Communists were aware of the offensive before it began and likely well informed of deliberations within the South Vietnamese high command as it progressed. The factionalised South Vietnamese officer corps meant that the commanders of the three divisions involved, all of which were considered 'elite', gave only passing attention to the orders of the operation's commander, Lieutenant General Hoang Xuan Lam – an officer who himself owed his position to his political loyalties rather than his demonstrated ability.[826] While these problems were not necessarily new, LAM SON 719 broadcast these frailties to a global audience in a very literal sense. Television images of panicked South

[823] Stephen P. Randolph, *Powerful and Brutal Weapons: Nixon, Kissinger, and the Easter Offensive,* Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2007, p. 17.
[824] Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam,* pp. 97–98; Randolph, *Powerful and Brutal Weapons,* pp. 13–14.
[825] Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam,* pp. 151–152.
[826] Randolph, *Powerful and Brutal Weapons,* pp. 15–16.

Vietnamese soldiers clinging to the skids of American helicopters sent to evacuate them made a mockery of Nixon's claims that the operation was a triumph for Vietnamisation. Public faith in the President's handling of the war plummeted, and pressure within Congress to disengage from Vietnam increased.[827]

Perhaps most importantly, LAM SON 719 emboldened the leadership of the VWP to pursue a military solution to the war. Faced with the growing success of Nixon's effort to isolate the DRV through rapprochement with China and détente with the Soviet Union, Le Duan and his fellow 'Southerners' hoped to score a decisive victory that would give them an unassailable position in negotiations in Paris. At the same time, the offensive was another representation of Le Duan and Le Duc Tho's dogmatic faith in the general offensive-general uprising concept. As in 1968, the troika of Le Duan, Le Duc Tho and Van Tien Dung believed that if the ARVN could be destroyed on the battlefield (a belief that the results of LAM SON 719 encouraged) it would be possible for the Thieu regime to be overthrown through a general uprising. This would leave the US, already on the brink of total withdrawal, with a *fait accompli* in Paris that would inevitably pave the way for the Communist takeover of the South.[828] To that end, in May 1971 the Politburo began issuing guidance for the planning of the spring-summer campaign, which was to begin in approximately March the following year.[829]

Unlike in 1968, however, most of the fighting in this new offensive would be done not by the lightly armed PLAF but by increasingly well-equipped PAVN formations. As Stephen Randolph has argued, LAM SON 719 demonstrated how the transformation of the PAVN during the late 1960s and early 1970s changed the nature of the task facing the RVNAF. Having spent years learning how to fight an enemy that relied on mobility and dispersion rather than firepower, the RVNAF suddenly faced Communist units equipped with tanks, artillery and increasingly powerful infantry weapons such as shoulder-launched surface-to-

[827] Randolph, *Powerful and Brutal Weapons,* p. 15, pp. 18–19.
[828] Nguyen, *Hanoi's War*, pp. 233–234.
[829] Randolph, *Powerful and Brutal Weapons,* p. 4.

air and anti-tank guided missiles. LAM SON 719 had proven to be a disaster for the South Vietnamese in part because previously accepted tactics such as the creation of firebases and the use of massed helicopter flights for troop movement proved extremely vulnerable to this new firepower.[830] Confident of the superiority of their troops to the RVNAF formations, the Communist leadership in Hanoi intended to extend their new technological parity by taking advantage of their numerical superiority and the strategic initiative. In all 14 PAVN divisions and 26 separate regiments took part in the offensive, which was split into three major thrusts to prevent a concentration of South Vietnamese defenders. In the north, PAVN units would attack over the DMZ into Quang Tri province, threatening the former imperial capital of Hue. In the south, other units would cross from Cambodia into Binh Long province, threatening Saigon. The third and final attack would open in Kontum province, with the objective of controlling the Central Highlands and eventually cutting the RVN in half.[831]

The 'conventional' nature of the offensive has been offered as proof, at the time and subsequently, of pacification's success in defeating the insurgency within South Vietnam.[832] Certainly, by the start of 1972 violence in the countryside and the overall strength of the Front both remained at very low levels. But such claims ignore both the absence of the unconventional/conventional dichotomy in Communist doctrine and the continuity in Hanoi's strategic thought.[833] It was a central tenet of Party and PAVN doctrine that for a general uprising to occur, the ARVN had to be crippled on the battlefield. The inability of PLAF and PAVN forces to accomplish this between 1965 and 1967 had been the catalyst for the Tet Offensive, which was designed to circumvent the problem by launching a general offensive-general uprising simultaneously. The 1972 Offensive was thus a return to orthodoxy, with the use of heavily armed PAVN troops an acknowledgement only of the inability of light infantry to inflict decisive defeats on ARVN on the battlefield.

[830] Randolph, *Powerful and Brutal Weapons,* p. 16.
[831] Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam,* pp. 127–128.
[832] See for example Colby, *Lost Victory,* pp. 318–321.
[833] Randolph, *Powerful and Brutal Weapons,* pp. 23–24.

Le Duan and his lieutenants clearly still had faith, however misplaced, in the ability of the NLF to force a political outcome in the South.[834]

Events in Phuoc Tuy between 1ATF's withdrawal in November 1971 and the start of the Nguyen Hue offensive in the province in late April 1972 also call into question the simplistic narrative that by early 1972 pacification had triumphed in the countryside. Although still low by the standard of earlier years, Front activity and strength continued to increase after the withdrawal of 1ATF. In January and February, for example, attacks were mounted on government buildings such as police stations and village offices in Hoi My, An Ngai, Binh Ba (twice), Phuoc Hai and Xuyen Moc.[835] At the same time the Front concentrated on a program of recruitment, either voluntary or forced. This program was particularly successful, and advisers estimated that the Front in Phuoc Tuy recruited 44 more members than security forces eliminated between 1 May and 31 December 1971.[836] In the context of a province population that had swollen to over 120,000, this number was far from large but along with the increasing levels of violence within villages, it underlined the Front's intended message and paved the way politically for the upcoming Nguyen Hue offensive.

The relative success of this recruiting drive brought into question the level of Front support within Phuoc Tuy. Had advisers underestimated it? One area that had proven to be particularly fruitful for the Front was Hoa Long, where between September 1971 and mid-January 1972, 44 residents had left the village and joined the guerrillas in the jungle. But PSA Raymond L. Perkins argued that the motivation of these largely teenage recruits was not political:

> I am more convinced that few Vietnamese, at least in this province and under the age of, say, twenty, join the VC for the slightest of ideological reasons. They join to avoid distant military service, to stay near home and the family, to avoid hard and boring daily labor, and to enjoy the

[834] Nguyen, *Hanoi's War,* pp. 243–246.
[835] Annex A, 'Attacks against Pacification' in Raymond L. Perkins, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy Province – Period Ending 31 January 1972', 4 February 1972; and Annex A, 'Attacks against Pacification' in Raymond L. Perkins, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy Province – Period Ending 29 February 1972', 4 March 1972; both in Province Reports 1972, Box 1593, A1 731, RG472, NARA.
[836] Raymond L. Perkins, 'Hoa Long Village – VC Recruiting Jackpot', 17 January 1972, p. 4; PSA Letters 1972, A1 731, RG0472, NARA.

> excitement of the hero's life in the wild. Furthermore, given the extremely low rate of casualties among the VC in Phuoc Tuy Province, they see relatively little personal danger in joining the VC side. If worst comes to worst, they can always Chieu Hoi in due time.[837]

These teenage recruits were a poor substitute mentally and physically for the hardened, well-motivated cadre they were replacing, and demonstrated the manpower scarcity that existed throughout the RVN by 1972. That these teenagers perceived service with the Front as being akin to a 'hero's life in the wild' was in Perkins' view a reflection of residual allegiance in traditionally pro-Front villages such as Hoa Long rather than an indication of a growing groundswell of support. Asked by CORDS in March to judge the level of support the Front would likely garner were it allowed to participate in a hypothetical post-ceasefire election, Perkins gave estimates ranging from 5 to 30 percent but believed the number would be closer to 10 province-wide.[838]

To advisers, the Front's positive recruiting ratio was also proof that government security forces were still not performing to an acceptable standard. The Phung Hoang program had returned to its moribund state after the November 1971 departure of Major Minh, with the interest of the Province Chief rapidly waning. Between November and April, 48 members of the infrastructure were neutralised, but advisers attributed this figure to natural attrition rather than the work of DIOCCs:

> The Phung Hoang programme continued to rely on fortune and the magic of statistics to sustain itself. Since in April, as in many months past, there have been no known instances in which a VCI was captured, killed or rallied that can be directly attributed to the efforts of the Phung Hoang committee, one is sorely tempted to wonder whether this generally unsatisfactory programme is worth the time of the 104 persons employed full time at province and district level.[839]

The waning effectiveness of Phung Hoang in Phuoc Tuy had obvious consequences. It reduced pressure on the Front infrastructure, allowing it to

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[837] Perkins, 'Hoa Long Village – VC Recruiting Jackpot', 17 January 1972, p. 4; PSA Letters 1972, A1 731, RG0472, NARA.
[838] Raymond L. Perkins, 'Special Political Reporting Requirements', 30 March 1972, pp. 2–3; Political Personalities 1972, Box 1597, A1 731, RG0472, NARA.
[839] Raymond L. Perkins, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy Province – Period Ending 30 April 1972, 4 May 1972, p. 2; 35 AWM347.

rebuild its strength and increase the level of activity within villages. It also contributed to the rebuilding of the VCI supply system across the south-eastern provinces of MR3. A CORDS assessment from March complained that the ineffectiveness of Phung Hoang and soft sentencing policies had left 'literally thousands of undetected VCI suppliers' within Long Khanh, Phuoc Tuy, Binh Tuy and Bien Hoa provinces, and consequently 'procurement of sufficient software supplies (food, clothing, medical supplies) in the four provinces poses little problem for the NVA/VC/VCI'. [840]

Advisers also continued to be concerned about the performance of the province's Territorials, in particular the Regional Forces. Province RF/PF adviser Major R. Musgraves reported that while he believed Phuoc Tuy's RF companies to be 'generally capable' they were 'not being used aggressively enough'.[841] Since 1971 the theoretical responsibility of RF units had shifted from a static security role to one of mobile operations in the 'clearing zone' that aimed to disrupt Front logistics and push enemy units away from populated areas. But despite the formation of 302 RF Battalion and four inter-company groups (designed to allow companies to operate in conjunction), companies continued to be used in independent, static roles, only conducting operations that lasted for between four and eight hours in the immediate vicinity of their compounds. Although RF Groups were nominally under the command of the respective district chiefs, in practice the province chief treated them as his own units, bypassing district level. Perkins strongly implied in an April report that group commanders were exploiting this command ambiguity to avoid having to conduct operations.[842]

The end result of these problems was that while the province possessed five battalion-sized units, each with a reported strength of between 400 and 500 soldiers, it was incapable of dealing with any sort of even moderate threat

[840] Frank S. Plummer Jr, 'VCI and Shadow Supply System', 22 March 1972, p. 1; CORDS 1972, Box 1595, A1 731, RG0472, NARA.
[841] Major R. Musgrave, 'Monthly Report of RF/PF Adviser Feb 72', 20 March 1972, p. 2; Annex D to 'AATTV Monthly Report – Feb 72'; 34 AWM293.
[842] Raymond L. Perkins, 'Paper on Regional Forces in Phuoc Tuy Province', 29 April 1972, p. 1; PSA Letters 1972, Box 1596, A1 731, RG0472, NARA.

from large Front units. In February a battalion of 274 Regiment entered Phuoc Tuy and encamped in the Xuyen Moc-Dat Do-Duc Thanh tri-border area. It was eventually ejected late in the month by a reinforced battalion of the 18th ARVN Division that had been detached from Long Khanh province. That an ARVN unit had been required was, according to Australian advisers, a source of 'major embarrassment' to Perkins and other senior members of Team 89 who believed province RF had been capable of the task.[843] But while Team 89 may have been correct in believing that on paper the province possessed the means to deal with main force formations like 274 Regiment, by their own later admission both 302 RF Battalion and the inter-company groups were totally unprepared in practice for that mission. Tu's decision to call for ARVN reinforcement was thus almost certainly the correct one, but it also emphasised his failure to adequately prepare the forces at his disposal for the likely threat facing Phuoc Tuy.[844]

The Nguyen Hue offensive opened on 30 March 1972 when PAVN units moved into Quang Tri province. The attack on Binh Long began three days later. Although ARVN units initially gave ground, they soon stabilised the situation. In the south the garrison of Binh Long's capital An Loc was isolated but defiant, while in the north a hodgepodge of units built around the 3rd ARVN Division defended Quang Tri City. 'Overall, the South Vietnamese have fought well under extremely difficult circumstances,' General Abrams informed Defense Secretary Laird on 24 April. 'Thus far the South Vietnamese have prevented the enemy from achieving his major objectives.'[845] But even as Abrams' message was delivered, ARVN positions began to unravel. In Kontum province – where the main offensive had opened on 14 April – the command post of the 22d Division was overrun, leading to the disintegration of the division.[846] In Quang Tri the

[843] Musgrave, 'Monthly Report of RF/PF Adviser Feb 72', 20 March 1972, p. 2; Annex D to 'AATTV Monthly Report – Feb 72'; 34 AWM293.
[844] Perkins, 'Papers on Regional Forces in Phuoc Tuy Province', 29 April 1972, p. 1; PSA Letters 1972, Box 1596, A1 731, RG0472, NARA; Raymond L. Perkins, 'Request for Removal of Province Chief, Phuoc Tuy Province', 15 May 1972, p. 3; Command Reporting File 1972, Box 1594, A1 731, RG0472, NARA.
[845] Sorley, *A Better War*, p. 325.
[846] Dale Andrade, *America's Last Vietnam Battle,* University Press of Kansas, Lawrence, 2001, pp. 251–252.

ramshackle command arrangements of the defending force fell apart, and PAVN units entered the city on 1 May. By the end of April RVNAF defences in both the north and the Central Highlands had collapsed, and the confidence displayed by Abrams just a week earlier disappeared.[847]

This collapse in the centre and north coincided with the opening of the Nguyen Hue offensive in Phuoc Tuy. In the early hours of 25 April parts of 33rd PAVN Regiment, reinforced by the Chau Duc District Company, attacked the Duc Thanh district compound and the hamlets of Ngai Giao, La Van and Xa Bang. Later in the morning Binh Ba was also occupied. Efforts to clear the area of Communist troops and reopen Route 2 by local RF companies, 302nd RF Battalion and 3/48 ARVN Regiment from Long Khanh between 25 April and 3 May all failed.[848] As this fighting went on in Duc Thanh, two battalions of 274 Regiment began interdicting Route 23 between Dat Do and Xuyen Moc. The road was physically cut through by the digging of trenches and the destruction of the Song Rai bridge, the latter accomplished by two traitors within the PF platoon assigned to guard it. The fall of the Nui Nhon outpost on 2 May completed the task. Thus by early May both Route 2 and 23 had been cut, with the Duc Thanh district compound besieged and both Xuyen Moc village and Binh Gia surviving on airlifted supplies.[849]

As had been the case elsewhere, after a period of consolidation Front forces renewed the offensive. On 17 May, D445 Battalion attacked the RF positions outside Dat Do, in preparation for an attack on the village itself. Despite advanced warning of the attack, the defending RF/PF were unable to prevent D445 infiltrating into Dat Do on the evening of the 19th and laying siege to the police compound the next morning.[850] After initial efforts by RF units to eject the Communist force had failed, two battalions of the 48th ARVN Regiment

[847] Clarke, *Advice and Support,* p. 483.
[848] 'Resume of Military Activity Within Phuoc Tuy Sector From 23 April to 15 Aug 1972', undated, p. 1; Command Reporting File, Box 1594, A1 731, RG472, NARA.
[849] 'After-Action Report, Binh Long Campaign 1972', 19 July 1972, p. 1; Command Reporting File 1972, Box 1594, A1 731, RG472, NARA. Raymond L. Perkins, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy – Period Ending 30 April 1972', 4 May 1972, p. 1; Province Reports 1972, Box 1596, A1 731, RG472, NARA.
[850] Chamberlain, *The Viet Cong D445 Battalion,,* pp. 83–84.

and two Ranger battalions were committed to the town on 25 May. D445, reinforced by 1/274 Regiment, resisted fiercely for the next week. On 28 May, a battalion of the 33d Regiment also occupied Hoa Long, forcing the diversion of two ARVN battalions away from Dat Do. On 27 May, the Xuyen Moc District Chief was wounded in a firefight and deserted his post; by 2 June, over half of Xuyen Moc village was under Communist control.[851]

This proved to be the highpoint of the offensive in Phuoc Tuy, however. On 21 May, the Province Chief, Lieutenant Colonel Tu, had been sacked and responsibility for military operations temporarily given to the commander of the 18th ARVN Division in Long Khanh.[852] Two battalions of the 48th ARVN Regiment cleared Hoa Long of Communist troops by 31 May and Dat Do was reoccupied by 2 June. The new Xuyen Moc District Chief, Major Nguyen The Cong, succeeded in rallying the local Territorials and had secured Xuyen Moc village by 8 June.[853] Although the Front was still capable of inflicting damage – as was the case on 16 June, when a sapper attack devastated Ap Suoi Nghe – the offensive had clearly failed, and military pressure across the province gradually slackened.[854] A similar state of affairs prevailed across South Vietnam. By the end of May, the siege of An Loc had been lifted and the threat in Kontum Province had eased. A month later, RVNAF units began to counterattack in Quang Tri. Although heavy fighting persisted until September, the Republic of Vietnam had survived.

The scale of the fighting and the damage inflicted in Phuoc Tuy was immense, far exceeding that of the 1968 Tet Offensive. Lieutenant Colonel Giac P. Modica, who replaced Perkins as PSA in May, described 'enemy military

[851] 'After-Action Report, Binh Long Campaign 1972', 19 July 1972, p. 8; Command Reporting File 1972, Box 1594, A1 731, RG472, NARA.
[852] 'After-Action Report, Binh Long Campaign 1972', 19 July 1972, pp. 5-6; Command Reporting File 1972, Box 1594, A1 731, RG472, NARA.
[853] 'After-Action Report, Binh Long Campaign 1972', 19 July 1972, p. 8; Command Reporting File 1972, Box 1594, A1 731, RG472, NARA.
[854] 'Resume of Military Activity Within Phuoc Tuy Sector From 23 April to 15 Aug 1972', undated, p. 1; Command Reporting File, Box 1594, A1 731, RG472, NARA.

successes on a scale never previously achieved here'.[855] Between 1 April and 24 June, 234 South Vietnamese soldiers were killed and another 677 wounded in Phuoc Tuy; an estimated 695 PLAF and PAVN soldiers were killed in the same period. The villages of Xuyen Moc, Dat Do, Binh Ba, Ngai Giao and Ap Suoi Nghe were devastated in the fighting. Xuyen Moc is instructive: during the fighting the village and the area around it were hit by 117 airstrikes and hundreds of rounds of naval gunfire. The DSA estimated that 80 percent of Bung Rieng, 30 percent of Nhan Nghia and 50 percent of Nhan Tri hamlets had been destroyed and the school, market and maternity dispensary had all been damaged. Over half the village population of 3,180 became refugees.[856] In all, an estimated 28,000 people within the province were displaced during the fighting.[857]

The political effects of the offensive in Phuoc Tuy were less obvious or measurable than the physical ones. In 1968, villagers affected by the fighting had been angry at both the Front for their attacks into populated areas and at the government for their failure to prevent this and the subsequent poor behaviour of ARVN units in Ba Ria and Long Dien. Four years later some of this sentiment remained, with residents in Dat Do reluctant to leave their houses for fear they would be looted and subsequently complaining that the conduct of the ARVN Rangers had fully justified their fears.[858] But advisers reported that popular opinion ran strongly in favour of the offensive being defeated, as it was generally accepted that a Communist defeat would be a significant step toward the conclusion of a peace treaty and the ending of the war.[859] For the already war-weary populace of Phuoc Tuy, the destruction caused by the offensive only seems to have reinforced the desire for peace. Thus the offensive did not appear

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[855] LTCOL Giac F. Modica, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy – Period Ending 31 May 1972', 5 June 1972, p. 1; Province Reports 1972, Box 1596, A1 731, RG472, NARA.
[856] MAJ John H. Getgood, 'Monthly Report (Xuyen Moc)', 27 June 1972, p. 1; District Report 1972 (2), Box 1594, A1 731, RG 472, NARA.
[857] LTCOL Giac F. Modica, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy Province – Period Ending 30 June 1972', 4 July 1972, p. 5; Province Reports 1972, Box 1596, A1 731, RG472, NARA.
[858] LTCOL Giac F. Modica, 'Special Reporting', 25 May 1972, p. 2; and LTCOL Giac F. Modica, 'Special Reporting', 8 June 1972, p. 2; both in Psychological Reports & MACCORDS 1972, Box 1596, A1 731, RG472, NARA.
[859] Between May and December 1972, the status of a potential peace treaty dominated Modica's weekly reports to CORDS. See for example LTCOL Giac F. Modica, 'Psychological Situation Report', 4 August 1972, p. 1, and LTCOL Giac F. Modica, 'Special Reporting', 22 December 1972, p. 1; both in Psychological Reports & MACCORDS 1972, Box 1596, A1 731, RG472, NARA.

to substantially alter the basic political allegiance of most of Phuoc Tuy's population, just as it failed to deliver physical control of any substantial portion of that population to the Front.

The offensive's primary consequence to the pacification program was to reveal an ongoing nexus of corruption and incompetence within the province government that, among other things, seriously compromised the ability of the Territorial Forces to defend Phuoc Tuy. It became clear that while on paper the RF/PF were close to authorised strength, in practice many units were seriously under-strength due to the presence of 'ghost soldiers' – enlisted soldiers who traded their pay to officers in return for not serving. Rates of absenteeism could be as high as 50 percent, ensuring that what should have been a significant manpower advantage for province forces was much reduced.[860] At the same time, the warnings advisers had been issuing about the need to build up the competency of the Regional Forces in mobile operations proved entirely justified. Units such as the 302 RF Battalion proved totally unable to mount anything other than day-long operations in the vicinity of major roads. The result of this failure to develop adequate experience in such operations meant that while individual units often fought well in certain circumstances, the overall defence of populated areas was a shambles.[861]

Despite the large-scale physical destruction and human displacement, advisers were confident Phuoc Tuy could recover quickly, arguing 'that the province has received very little lasting damage when one considers the intensity of the offensive, within its borders'.[862] There had been minimal damage to crops despite the intensity of the fighting and the fishing industry was largely unaffected. Echoing the view of their predecessors in March 1968, Team 89 members also saw the Nguyen Hue offensive as an almost Darwinian process that had exposed incompetent and corrupt members of the province

[860] 'Joint AFV/Embassy Pacification Report for June 72', 14 July 1972; 35 AWM347.
[861] LTCOL Giac F. Modica, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy – Period Ending 31 May 1972', 5 June 1972, p. 1; Province Reports 1972, Box 1596, A1 731, RG472, NARA. This account is disputed somewhat in 'Joint AFV/Embassy Pacification Report for May 1972', 9 June 1972; 35 AWM347.
[862] Presentation to Ambassador, undated [late 1972], pp. 20–21; Box 4, A1 488 Province Profiles – Phuoc Tuy, RG 472, NARA.

government and allowed them to be weeded out. Those removed included the district chief of Xuyen Moc, the Deputy Province Chief for Administration, the Deputy Province Chief for Security, the Police Chief, the Finance Chief, the head of Social Welfare and Refugees and 'numerous battalion and company commanders'.[863] The new Province Chief, Lieutenant Colonel Tran Dinh Bich, had shown himself to be an energetic and honest officer who would not hesitate to relieve underperforming subordinates. Consequently the chances of government rebuilding successfully seemed high.

But the echo of 1968 highlighted the continuity in the problems facing Phuoc Tuy. While individuals could be removed, the same patterns of nepotism, corruption and incompetence remained. Nearly all of those removed during or after the offensive had inherited their positions from officials who had themselves been moved on for problems relating to corruption or incompetence. This was a trend that was not unique to Phuoc Tuy. Advisers from General Abrams down believed South Vietnamese failures during the Nguyen Hue offensive were the result not of inherent military weakness but poor leadership at all levels. But thanks to the internal politics of the military, incompetence and corruption rarely carried permanent consequences for those concerned. Instead, poor officers were shuffled sideways into minor roles from where they could eventually be rehabilitated.[864] As events in Phuoc Tuy demonstrate, this had obvious consequences for the success of pacification. Corruption seriously compromised the functioning of the government and the faith of the people in that government. That corruption persisted within Phuoc Tuy despite the routine replacement of corrupt individuals raised serious questions about the long-term health of the government in the province and indeed all of South Vietnam. The response of the populace to the Nguyen Hue offensive appeared to confirm the increasingly marginal nature of the Front in Phuoc Tuy, but also the continued weakness in some respects of the South Vietnamese state.

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[863] Presentation to Ambassador, undated [late 1972], p. 9; Box 4, A1 488 Province Profiles – Phuoc Tuy, RG 472, NARA.
[864] Clarke, *Advice and Support,* pp. 483–485.

By late June it was clear in Hanoi that Le Duan's third effort to force a military solution in the south had failed. Accepting that it was now impossible to achieve victory in the short term, the Politburo resolved in early July to return to the negotiating table and aim only to secure US withdrawal from Vietnam rather than the removal of the Thieu government. Talks resumed on 19 July, but it was not until 15 September that Le Duc Tho revealed to primary US negotiator Henry Kissinger the extent of the concessions the DRV was prepared to make.[865] Over a series of sessions between 8 and 12 October, a draft agreement was hammered out between the two sides. The concession by the VWP leadership that Thieu's government would be allowed to remain rendered the agreement a primarily military matter that decided the future of US and North Vietnamese units within the borders of the RVN. Despite the DRV's concessions, the proposed treaty remained remarkably favourable to it. In exchange for total US withdrawal from the south, the DRV promised to release US prisoners of war then in captivity in the north and cease the infiltration of troops into the South. But PAVN units currently within the RVN would not be required to withdraw, and equipment destroyed during the recent fighting could be replaced.[866] It was a strikingly generous offer.

It was not surprising then that President Thieu vigorously objected to the proposed agreement, and a series of meetings with Kissinger between 19 and 22 October did nothing to change Thieu's mind. Thieu was enraged by what he saw as a national and personal betrayal and publicly made clear his objection to the terms, particularly the provision for the maintenance of the 140,000 North Vietnamese troops that the South Vietnamese claimed were within the RVN.[867] Reluctantly, Kissinger returned to the negotiations with a list of modifications demanded by Thieu and his cabinet – having already declared in a press conference on 26 October that 'peace was at hand'.[868] The North Vietnamese interpreted the US moves as an act of extreme bad faith, and

[865] Nguyen, *Hanoi's War* p. 272.
[866] Bundy, *A Tangled Web,* p. 352.
[867] Nguyen, *Hanoi's War,* pp. 281–282.
[868] Nguyen, *Hanoi's War,* pp. 286–289.

negotiations deteriorated sharply. Suddenly, the imminent peace was again up in the air.

Two key points emerge from this situation. The first is that the failure of the Nguyen Hue offensive and the resumption of negotiations made it clear in July, well before the publication of the draft agreement in late October, that a ceasefire was likely in the short term. It thus became imperative for both sides to maximise their physical control of the population throughout Vietnam, and act to ensure that political control could be maintained after a ceasefire. In an analysis written in late August, PSA Modica predicted that in the event of a ceasefire, Front forces in Phuoc Tuy would make a last gasp attempt to gain control of hamlets throughout the province, and then attempt post-ceasefire to gain political control of as much population as possible. This would be accomplished through rebuilding the political infrastructure within government-controlled but traditionally Front-friendly villages such as Hoa Long, and luring displaced populations to their old homes in Front-controlled territory. Modica argued that Front propaganda would paint 'life under their control as a pastoral Eden, where agricultural, social, medical and educational benefits abound' and that the government 'would be guilty of a major political misjudgement' if it believed villagers would not return to their former homes after a ceasefire was declared.[869]

The second key point is that after the discussions with Kissinger in September and early October, the VWP believed that a ceasefire would come into effect by the end of October or the first week of November.[870] This belief was driven by both comments made by Kissinger in the negotiations and the Party's own internal analysis of US motives, which emphasised Nixon's desire to cement a deal prior to the US Presidential election on 7 November.[871] The expectation that a ceasefire would commence by the first week of November helps explain the upsurge of violence in Phuoc Tuy during the last two weeks of

[869] Giac F. Modica, 'Ceasefire Scenario – Phuoc Tuy', 16 August 1972, p. 3; PSA Letters 1972, Box 1594, A1 731, RG472, NARA.
[870] Nguyen, *Hanoi's War,* p. 272.
[871] Bundy, *A Tangled Web,* p. 357.

October. A sudden increase in attacks by fire and harassment of traffic on key roads mid-month culminated in the occupation of several hamlets in Dat Do village on 24 October and an attempt to occupy Ngai Giao between 26 and 31 October. In the case of the former, RF companies succeeded in clearing the hamlets and killing 70-80 Front soldiers by 31 October; in the case of the latter, an estimated Front company was never able to penetrate the defences of the local RF/PF. By the time Nixon was triumphantly re-elected on 7 November, all villages were under government control and Front military activity had subsided to a very low level.[872]

The events of October conformed to Modica's predictions of Front activity in the immediate lead-up to a ceasefire. Intelligence derived from captured documents and interrogations of prisoners and Hoi Chanhs suggested that the attacks had been designed to secure control of population centres in anticipation of an imminent ceasefire, a fact later confirmed in *Dat Do*.[873] The failure of this effort – for even if a ceasefire had been called on 31 October, the Front would have been left with nothing of substance under its control – underlined the military weakness of the Front in Phuoc Tuy by late 1972. The attacks were undertaken purely by local forces such as D445 and the district companies, units that had suffered in the Nguyen Hue offensive and had only been able to replace their losses through the impressment of teenage boys. Unsurprisingly, they lacked the resilience 274 and 33 Regiments had displayed five months earlier. At the same time, advisers saw the successes in Ngai Giao and Dat Do as proof that the RF/PF had learnt from the earlier fighting. The problems of confused chains of command had been solved, and the response to the Front incursions had been both rapid and coordinated.[874]

That the cease-fire had not eventuated was, as explained above, the result of both Thieu's objections and the subsequent Communist interpretation of those objections as evidence of bad faith on the part of the US. By mid-

[872] Giac F. Modica, 'Province Report – Phuoc Tuy – Period Ending 31 October 1972', 4 November 1972, p. 1; Province Reports 1972, Box 1596, A1 731, RG472, NARA.
[873] Huong (ed), *The History of the Struggle*, p. 68.
[874] Annex A to Part A AAAGV Monthly Report, Joint AAAGV/Embassy Report, p. 5.

December negotiations were at an impasse. Infuriated that his efforts to disengage from Vietnam were being impeded by both the RVN and DRV, Nixon unleashed his last resort. Between December 18 and December 29, in an operation codenamed LINEBACKER II, approximately 40,000 tons of bombs were dropped by US aircraft on the DRV, with strikes concentrating on military and economic targets in and around Hanoi and Haiphong.[875] Although the so-called 'Christmas bombings' generated fierce criticism domestically and internationally, they accomplished Nixon's objectives. By December 29 it was clear to the North Vietnamese leadership that they could not sustain further attacks, and they communicated to Washington that they were willing to return to negotiations using the October draft as a basis.[876] In Saigon, correspondence from Nixon to Thieu was an unsubtle mixture of carrot and stick. While Nixon reassured his South Vietnamese counterpart of continuing US support after the signing of a peace accord, he also made it clear that support would end immediately should the RVN not agree to existing proposals. Thieu and his cabinet felt they had no choice but to agree. On 23 January 1973 the Peace Accords were initialled in Paris and the ceasefire formally came into effect on 28 January in South Vietnam.[877]

Across South Vietnam, the imminent signing of the ceasefire led between 23 January and 6 February to a spasm of violence that US advisers nicknamed 'Landgrab '73'.[878] In Phuoc Tuy, the violence unfolded much as it had in October: attacks on villages by local Front units were repulsed throughout the province, but the fighting created over 10,000 refugees.[879] *Dat Do* describes Front cadre and soldiers 'mobilising the people to rise up, seizing and take control [sic] of 22 hamlets in nine villages and attacking the enemy' on 23 January.[880] The later admission that on 16 February 'the enemy deployed large forces and stormed into the liberated zones [of Dat Do]' is perhaps a grudging

[875] Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam,* p. 181.
[876] Nguyen, *Hanoi's War,* p. 297.
[877] Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam,* pp. 185–186.
[878] William E. Le Gro, *Vietnam from Cease-Fire to Capitulation,* University Press of the Pacific, Hawaii, Honolulu, p. 21.
[879] McNeill and Ekins, *Fighting to the Finish,* p. 659.
[880] Huong (ed), *The History of the Struggle,* p. 69.

acknowledgement that in fact little was achieved by the Front during the ceasefire period.[881]

The sad reality is that, for the Vietnamese on both sides, the promise of the January 1973 ceasefire and the Peace Accords proved illusory. Historian George Herring was correct when he noted that the Peace Accords did not answer 'the major question over which the war had been fought – the political future of South Vietnam', and succeeded only in 'establish[ing] a framework for continuing the war without direct American participation'.[882] The leadership of the VWP remained committed to gaining control of South Vietnam, while President Thieu and the senior leadership of the RVN and RVNAF remained equally committed to maintaining an independent, non-Communist South Vietnam and ejecting the remaining Communist forces from their territory. Over 6,600 South Vietnamese soldiers were killed in the three months that followed the ceasefire alone.[883] Although the intensity of combat at times ebbed, fighting between the RVN and the Communists did not stop until after the fall of Saigon in April 1975.

This process was repeated in microcosm in Phuoc Tuy. The struggle between the RVN and the Front did not end in February 1973; the advisory presence simply left. The Australians had already departed, the entire AATTV having been withdrawn by the incoming Whitlam Labor government in December 1972.[884] The members of Team 89, like the rest of CORDS, left the province shortly after the ceasefire. In their absence, the struggle in Phuoc Tuy resumed a familiar rhythm. As advisers had predicted, the Front concentrated on rebuilding its political apparatus and luring villagers displaced during the course of the conflict to return to their land. *D445* records that, nearly seven years after they had been destroyed, Long Tan and Long Phuoc were re-established as 'combat villages' in early 1974.[885] Five months later, a routine

[881] Huong (ed), *The History of the Struggle,* p. 70.
[882] George Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950–1975,* McGraw-Hill Inc, New York, 1996 (1979), p. 282 and p. 285.
[883] Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam,* p. 192.
[884] McNeill and Ekins, *Fighting to the Finish,* pp. 656–657.
[885] Chamberlain, *The Viet Cong D445 Battalion,* pp. 86–88.

report filed by the Australian Ambassador to the RVN on the situation in Phuoc Tuy stated that Front units were interdicting Route 2 north of Ngai Giao, while a small force in the Long Hai hills caused 'minor and sporadic disturbances'.[886] While travel to Xuyen Moc along Route 23 remained safe, D445 was encamped in the Light and Long Green areas in Dat Do district, making travel to Lang Phuoc Hai dangerous. This snapshot of the situation in the province would have been instantly recognisable to anyone who had familiar with Phuoc Tuy between 1966 and 1972 and emphasised the Front's resilience.

American and Australian advisers left Phuoc Tuy at the end of a year that had seen pacification within the province undergo a stern test. The scenario that had worried these advisers at the end of 1971, that the PLAF and PAVN main force units lurking on the fringes of the province would take advantage of the withdrawal of 1ATF to descend on Phuoc Tuy's villages, had come true during the Nguyen Hue offensive. The subsequent fighting was the most serious Phuoc Tuy experienced during the war, causing widespread destruction and temporarily displacing tens of thousands of people. Despite the level of violence, however, advisers remained optimistic about the state of pacification in Phuoc Tuy. The Front's violence seemed to have generated little political support for them, and had instead alienated many villagers. The province economy suffered comparatively little damage despite the scale of the fighting, and the central government continued to aggressively push the expansion of the Ap Suoi Nghe site for the relocation of refugees from the northern reaches of the RVN. Finally, although the performance of the province Territorial Forces had been poor in places during the Nguyen Hue offensive, their success in defeating Front incursions in October 1972 and January 1973 suggested a new maturity to advisers. Under the leadership of an aggressive and confident Province Chief, pacification in Phuoc Tuy had seemingly passed its final test.[887]

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[886] Ambassador G.J. Price, 'Security in Phuoc Tuy Province', 13 May 1974, p. 2; 201/1/15 PART 5 A4531, NAA..

[887] Both Willbanks in *Abandoning Vietnam,* Ch 6 'The Ultimate Test of Vietnamization' pp. 122–162 and Colby, *Lost Victory,* Ch 20 'The Test Passed: Spring 1972', pp. 314–321, describe the Nguyen Hue Offensive as a 'test'.

Yet, as this chapter has shown, any analysis of Phuoc Tuy at the end of 1972 could find just as many reasons to be pessimistic as optimistic about pacification in the province. Once again, a major Communist offensive had revealed deep seams of incompetence and corruption within the Province government. The advisers welcoming the performance of the new Province Chief and his subordinates seemed oblivious to the way in which the problems of corruption and poor performance existed beyond individuals in the province hierarchy. Pacification in Phuoc Tuy and indeed throughout Vietnam would remain hobbled by this endemic corruption until it was solved. At the same time, for all of pacification's successes over the course of 1972, the inescapable fact was that by the time the ceasefire was signed in January 1973, the Front remained a functioning political and military force in Phuoc Tuy. It was undoubtedly weaker in both these respects than it had been in 1966. Yet conversely its relative success in recruiting new members in late 1971 and its activities before the ceasefire showed it retained a foothold, albeit a minor one, in the province. Pacification may have passed the test of 1972 but it had not succeeded in its ultimate objective in Phuoc Tuy.

Conclusion

This thesis has explored the conduct and assessed the achievements and failures of pacification in Phuoc Tuy province between 1966 and 1972. It did so in order to gain an understanding of pacification on its own terms, and to help put the activities of 1 Australian Task Force into a context that is often lacking in existing accounts. Much of the literature on pacification in Vietnam is driven by a desire to use the past in the service of contemporary arguments, or provides an overview of the program that almost by definition must resort to broad brushstrokes. In contrast, much of the literature on the activities of 1ATF in Phuoc Tuy focuses extremely narrowly on the Task Force itself, and relies almost entirely on Australian archival material. By grounding its analysis in both American and Australian archival sources, this thesis has provided a case study of pacification that trades width for depth and avoids institutional or national biases.

Many who served in Vietnam, together with subsequent historians, have argued that pacification succeeded in its objectives of defeating the National Liberation Front. The eventual fall of the Republic of Vietnam in April 1975 was, they say, solely the result of the drastic cuts in aid to the RVN by US Congress after February 1973.[888] While this 'stab-in-the-back' narrative is not quite as explicit in Australian accounts of the war in Phuoc Tuy, the sense of progress and sacrifice squandered after the withdrawal of 1ATF in late 1971 is palpable.[889] In 1978, Major Adrian Roberts, who had served with 1ATF in 1966 and then with the AATTV in Phuoc Tuy in 1972, told historian Ian McNeill that by April 1972, 'things had simply gone back to what they had been like in 1966'.

[888] As the name suggests, William Colby's staunchly advocates this view in *Lost Victory*. In particular see pp. 343-355. For a modern perspective see Moyar, *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey*, and Mark W. Woodruff, *Unheralded Victory*, 1999.
[889] The labelling of this narrative around American defeat as 'stab-in-the-back', and the implied comparison with events in Germany after 1919, is from Jeffrey P. Kimball, 'The stab-in-the-back legend and the Vietnam War', *Armed Forces and Society,* Vol. 14, No. 3, pp. 433-458. For Australian narrative see Ham, *The Australian War,* p. 662.

It was, Roberts said, 'as if we had never really been there'.[890] This phrase, first published in McNeill's 1986 book *The Team*, has appeared in almost every history of Australian involvement in Vietnam published since.[891] The comments of Major General Jeffrey, quoted in the Introduction, sum up this lingering belief: '[w]e Australians had everything under control in Phuoc Tuy Province and one wonders if those tactics could have been employed throughout the rest of South Vietnam, whether the outcome might not have been different.'[892]

Yet this view that pacification triumphed is unarguably wrong. Pacification did not succeed in defeating the National Liberation Front within Phuoc Tuy. However, this answer is only marginally more satisfactory than the stabbed-in-the-back mythology it counters. This thesis has deliberately examined the conduct of pacification over six years, and flagged both achievements and failures throughout, to emphasise what historian Richard Hunt termed 'the ambiguous achievements of pacification'.[893] Pacification changed the physical and social geography of Phuoc Tuy. It weakened the existing social order by starting to redistribute political and economic power within the villages. Above all, it succeeded in eroding, without destroying, the power of the Front, reducing it from an organisation that could compete openly with the government in 1966 to one forced to operate clandestinely by the end of 1972. Roberts' words emphasise the continuity in the situation in Phuoc Tuy between 1966 and 1972, but the change that occurred must also be remembered.

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[890] Major A.F. Roberts, *Interview,* 2 February 1978, p. 75, AWM, quoted in McNeill, *The Team,* p. 470.
[891] Roberts' comment appears in Frost, *Australia's War in Vietnam,* p. 162; Rowe, *Vietnam: The Australian Experience*, p. 162; Murphy, *Harvest of Fear,* p. 263; Ham, *Vietnam: The Australian War,* p. 581; McNeill and EKins, *Fighting to the Finish,* p. 647; and Bruce Davies, *Vietnam: The Complete Story of the Australian War,* Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, 2012, p. 547. It is surely, after Harold Holt's quip of 'All the way with LBJ', the most repeated phrase generated by Australia's involvement in Vietnam.
[892] Major General Michael Jeffrey to AATTV Reunion Dinner, Perth, 31 August 2002 quoted in Ham, *Vietnam: The Australian War,* p. 662.
[893] Hunt, *Pacification,* p. 252

Pacification's 'ambiguous achievements' were in part a product of its conception. The reasons why individuals supported or joined the Front are many and varied, but several broad trends can clearly be identified. Sixty years of French colonialism had produced by the 1940s a society increasingly divided between a wealthy and powerful minority, made up of European *colons* and a Vietnamese bourgeoisie, and a poor, disenfranchised majority made up primarily of rural tenant farmers. Although the struggle against the French that erupted in the late 1940s was cloaked in nationalism, it was also clearly driven by this social inequality. Unsurprisingly, this social conflict persisted after the withdrawal of the French from Indochina in 1955. The leadership of the Vietnamese Workers' Party was, after a five-year interlude, able to exploit rural anger at the return of tenancy and widespread oppression under the Diem regime to create a new insurgency within the nascent Republic of Vietnam. How individuals aligned themselves within this conflict could depend on any number of factors, including religion, personal or family history, or personal ambition. Yet this decision always came against the backdrop of a conflict defined by the distribution of economic and political power within Vietnamese society.

American and Vietnamese officials and leaders consistently struggled to understand this, and in any case often preferred to treat the symptoms rather than the disease. For many (although far from all) Vietnamese officers and leaders, this attitude was driven by a desire to preserve the existing social order. Not unreasonably, these men found it difficult to implement programs of reform that threatened their own personal positions. Part of the reason why radical programs of reform, such as that proposed by Colonel Nguyen Be, were ignored was precisely because they represented a threat to entrenched interests within the RVN. This attitude persisted even in the early 1970s, as political and economic reform began to be enacted. President Thieu was prepared to break up the landlord class and transfer economic power to rural farmers, but the events surrounding the 1971 Presidential election show how he remained sensitive to threats to his own political power and to a political order built around the ARVN officer corps.

For many Americans, the problem was their ability to recognise the nature of this social conflict in the first place. Guided by their own domestic experiences during the Depression and the New Deal and their preconceptions about Asia, they saw the conflict in Vietnam as driven by a pre-existing poverty that external, malicious Communist forces were willing to exploit. Modernisation theory provided both an explanation for, and a solution to, the problem: the key was to accelerate the 'development' of South Vietnamese society. While the more grandiose aspects of this 'solution', such as President Johnson's 'TVA on the Mekong', did not eventuate, modernisation theory was nonetheless critical in shaping pacification. It both helped to entrench the view that poverty was the driving force behind discontent in rural areas and gave pacification its transformational element – that rural Vietnamese society had to be dragged into the 20th century if it was to be saved from Communism.

The influence of this theory on pacification in practice across Phuoc Tuy was subtle but wide-ranging. The population of Slope 30 were resettled in the newly constructed Ap Suoi Nghe as an act of perceived military necessity, but Australian advisers and soldiers were confident that the new inhabitants would embrace their modern, Western-style village and lifestyle and in doing so serve as an example for the rest of the province of the benefits of pacification and the government. In the event, the failure of the Ap Suoi Nghe project served only to highlight the gap that existed between adviser perceptions and what villagers actually wanted. This gap was evident, although often more subtly, throughout the struggle in Phuoc Tuy. As late as 1971, PSA Robert L. Walkinshaw was declaring that '[w]hat we need to remember is that nothing is more vulnerable to communist propaganda than the empty stomach of man, whether he be Vietnamese or Chinese.'[894] Echoing the language used by Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson a decade earlier, Walkinshaw argued that the average Vietnamese peasant 'wants decent housing; he wants his children clothed and fed properly; and he wants them educated in order to survive in a world which is becoming

[894] Robert L. Walkinshaw, 'Comprehensive Campaign to Upgrade Most Unsecure Districts', 29 March 1971, p. 2; Upgrade 1972, Box 1596, A1 731, RG472, NARA.

more and more competitive'.[895] While this may have been true in the narrowest sense, the grievances driving popular support for the Front were clearly more complex than poverty. That advisers struggled to understand this, even after five years of pacification, shows how deeply entrenched preconceptions of the nature of the conflict were in American (and Australian) minds.

While American, Vietnamese and Australian officials and advisers may have struggled to understand the Front's popular appeal, they did understand the mechanics of the conflict within the villages. By the time Free World units arrived in Phuoc Tuy in 1966, both the Australian and US armies had a broad range of theoretical models and practical experience regarding Communist insurgency to draw on. Contrary to the image of blundering Western soldiers obsessed with the idea of fighting a 'conventional' war (or, in one critique of Australian performance, erecting imperial-style 'barriers'), those who fought in Vietnam understood the central role of the people in Maoist-inspired insurgencies.[896] Practical experience had shown that the role of military forces in these conflicts was not just to attack insurgents but to isolate them from the people. This served not only to starve the insurgent forces of the recruits, supplies and intelligence they needed but also to prevent them from interfering with the restoration of civil authority within villages and the implementation of reforms designed to win back the allegiance of the population. The elegant description of the process as 'breaking the links' was Australian, but the idea was understood by the American leadership within MACV just as well.

In Phuoc Tuy, however, the commanders of 1ATF found it extremely difficult to successfully implement this comparatively simple operational concept. This was largely thanks to the strength of the PLAF and PAVN in and around Phuoc Tuy. Task Force commanders were forced to balance the provision of direct security to villages in the province with the need to counter the large and powerful main-force units that lived in the base areas on Phuoc Tuy's fringes. These units were a significant threat not only to the province's

[895] Walkinshaw, 'Comprehensive Campaign to Upgrade Most Unsecure Districts', 29 March 1971, p. 3; Upgrade 1972, Box 1596, A1 731, RG472, NARA.
[896] For 'imperial barriers' see Lockhart, *The Minefield,* pp. 1-43.

populated areas but also to units of the Task Force itself, as the Battle of Long Tan in August 1966 demonstrated. For much of its time in Phuoc Tuy, the Task Force lacked the resources to carry out these two missions simultaneously, particularly in 1966 and 1967 and again in 1971 when it did not have a third infantry battalion. Brigadier Graham's decision to build the Dat Do minefield in 1967 both emphasised how short of troops 1ATF was and perversely created an incentive for later Task Force commanders to avoid population security missions in Dat Do and Long Dien. The desire to avoid casualties in order to relax domestic political pressure was another consideration Task Force commanders were forced to make when allocating resources to complete their mission in Phuoc Tuy.

This lack of resources was exacerbated by the poor performance of the Vietnamese units, particularly the Regional and Popular Forces, within Phuoc Tuy. In theory, these units had the numerical strength to provide security to the hamlets and villages of the province, freeing up the Task Force for operations further afield. In practice, they proved hopelessly inadequate to the task. This was partly of because of rectifiable weaknesses, such as poor training or logistics. Yet in hindsight it was also clearly because of problems that were not so easily fixed. Poorly motivated and paid South Vietnamese soldiers proved reluctant to risk their lives each day in a seemingly interminable conflict. Endemic corruption not only robbed these soldiers of their pay and equipment, but also provided a means to coexist with the enemy.

The inherent weaknesses in the South Vietnamese state, embodied by the Territorial Forces, in many ways defined pacification in Phuoc Tuy. Corruption, apathy and incompetence hindered the ability of the government bureaucracy to service the needs of the broader population, even as it also left the Regional and Popular Forces unable to defend any progress that did occur. The reform programs of 1970–71 held much promise, but their implementation in Phuoc Tuy was to an extent stymied by failings within government. The tampering and manipulation of elections within the province, for example, undercut much of the value of democratic governance by eroding the perceived

legitimacy of the officials in question and the process as a whole. That officials in Phuoc Tuy felt compelled to meddle demonstrated not only personal corruption but an institutional immaturity, evidence of the struggle the South Vietnamese state faced as it tried to grow from its colonial roots into a modern, independent future.

The immaturity of the South Vietnamese state also pointed to the problems with the advisory model. In many ways the advisory effort was a logical extension of modernisation – a belief that the Vietnamese could, with the right amount of Western coaching, be propelled into modernity and competency. In practice, this did not occur in Phuoc Tuy. Advisers lacked the leverage to overcome the webs of patronage and corruption that kept poor officials and soldiers employed in Phuoc Tuy. Moreover, individual advisers were a transitory presence; often serving just twelve months within the province, they lacked the time to build the cultural awareness and language skills they needed to build strong relationships with those they were advising. Taken in this context, John Paul Vann's infamous declaration about his Vietnamese counterparts that 'they make the same mistake over and over again in the same way' applies equally to the advisory effort in Phuoc Tuy.[897]

Pacification, although it succeeded in changing much in Phuoc Tuy, ultimately failed in its objective of defeating the province within the Front. It is possible to speculate on whether this result might have changed had pacification been conceived or conducted in a different manner. The circumstances of the fall of the Republic of Vietnam and the nature of the defeat suffered by the United States has meant that much of the historiography concerning the war is dominated not only by 'what if' but 'if only'. This thesis has made a deliberate effort to ignore pointless speculation on what might have been in favour of what actually happened. In doing so it has delivered a case study of pacification that has aimed to trade width for depth and in doing so has challenged some of the orthodoxies surrounding the war in Vietnam. It is hoped that the conclusion

[897] Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie,* p. 277, quoted in Daddis, *No Sure Victory,* p. 55.

reached here will, at some point, be contrasted against those of other studies that adopt a similar framework.

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