

VIETNAM: COMMUNICATION FACTORS OF REVOLUTIONARY
GUERRILLA WAR

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Abstract: The past five years of revolutionary guerrilla warfare in Vietnam can best be described as a highly sophisticated "third generation" of political-armed struggle, the essence of which is communication. Each act of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam (or Viet Cong) including its guerrilla attacks and violence program, basically is conceived, not in military terms, but in terms of the communication of ideas. Although the NLF employs mass media as well as the traditional informal channels of communication, these are mere reinforcements, and its main effort is concentrated on the social organization or social movement as a channel of communication. Since the NLF seeks victory by means of the Organizational Weapon, it follows that only counter-organizational efforts put to work as communication tools—and supplemented by military operations and civic action programs—can reverse the tide.

In a sense, the communication of ideas is what the struggle in Vietnam is all about. In the past, the guerrilla organization, for example the maquis in France during World War Two, was only mildly interested in explaining itself, for it assumed that everyone knew what it stood for and either supported it or not. The National Liberation Front took nothing for granted and spent enormous amounts of time, manpower, and money in explaining itself—to itself, to the other side in Vietnam, and to the world at large. It developed a vertical liberation association structure to ensure the continual flow of "pure"

messages from its central committee to the Vietnamese village. And it developed a horizontal structure of liberation associations, at the village level, as a self-reinforcing communicational device and to insure a constant audience. Its military arm kept open the channels of communication, blocked the communication efforts of the Government of Vietnam, and provided informational input, such as military victories, for its own system. It employed some four thousand agit-prop workers who tirelessly beat the back country in the name of the cause.

However, it was not the ideas themselves that were so much in conflict as it was the manner of communication. The communists masked well their ideology, and their thought--that is to say, Marxism-Leninism--rarely broke the surface in public. Indeed, the avowed goals of the NLF and the long stated objectives of the Government of Vietnam found no grounds for argument. The NLF slogan, which appeared in all of its public and internal documents, was: peace, unity, independence, and democracy. The Government of Vietnam stood for these, and in fact what government does not? The competition, therefore, was in the arena of communication. The battle was fought on the field of ways, of means, of infrastructure.

The father of the NLF was the Viet Minh, the force that defeated the French. Its grandfather was the Chinese Communist revolution. However, the grandson was far more sophisticated than his forebears. If the heart of the Chinese Communist revolution was strategy, if the heart of the Viet Minh war

was spirit, then the heart of the NLF was communication--and specifically, communication by means of the social movement.

Perhaps if I use the homely example of the education of Douglas Pike in Vietnam, the nature and the power of this communist tool may appear in somewhat sharper relief. I came out of American mass media, having been a newsman before joining USIA. And although most of my experience had been abroad, in Asia, I considered mass media the end all of communication. One does not have to be in Vietnam very long to realize that mass media there is not a particularly promising means of communication. Not only is the country's mass media weak, but even more importantly, the Vietnamese population is unconditioned to mass media appeals. Our first efforts were to help the Vietnamese build a mass media structure. Since time was of the essence, we also attempted to utilize traditional channels of communication, the so-called informal channels such as word of mouth, face-to-face, itinerant travelers, rumors, and so forth. These, we discovered, were effective for certain types of information but not others. And as an operator I discovered they were un--dependable--some information could be moved through them and some could not.

In searching for other methods it occurred to me that the NLF faced the same problem, and so I began an investigation of that organization to see how it handled its communication. It soon became apparent that the NLF was

one vast communication device, and I spent the next three years studying it seriously. I accumulated a mountain of data which, during the past year at MIT's Center for International Studies, I have turned into a book that will be published this fall by The MIT Press under the title: VIET CONG.

I came to realize what the NLF leadership clearly had realized from the start--what unfortunately is all too poorly understood in the United States--that social organizations are a potent communication device, especially in under-developed countries. Yet, this process is in no way alien to Americans with their strong proclivity for the voluntary organization. Examples lay all about us. The Boy Scout movement, for instance, transmits and inculcates a whole complex of beliefs, the scope of which is indicated by the 12 Scout laws. A college fraternity can heavily indoctrinate an impressionable youth, shape his political beliefs and his economic values--even dictate what sort of a wife to choose. This is done not as a pre-meditated brainwashing scheme, but simply as a by-product function of the organizational essence or nature of its being. What the NLF did was deliberately to create such an organizational structure, specifically to transmit information and data, as well as ideals, beliefs, and values.

I might, before leaving this conceptual framework, note our experience in Vietnam with respect to the three channels of communication: traditional, mass media, and organizational; and in relation to the three levels of commun-

ication: data--or what is said; interpretation--or the meaning; and evaluation--
or what might be called the "so what." A chart best illustrates it:

Channel	Data	Interpretation	Evaluation
Traditional Channel	excellent but selective	good but un-dependable	usually only implied
Mass Media Channel	very good but restricted	good but restricted	poor
Organizational Channel	excellent	very good	excellent

Thus, it came about that in the social movement as a communication device, I found the solution to the mystery which for so long puzzled knowledgeable and thinking Americans: How could the NLF achieve success in the face of overwhelming GVN and American military superiority and despite the massive inputs of American material resources for civic action programs to alleviate economic grievances? Not superior ideology, not more dedicated personnel, not because voluntary support of the villager had been won, but because of the social movement, shaped into a self-contained, self-supporting channel of communication--that was the NLF's secret weapon.

Working from the fundamental assumption that if an idea could be rooted in the group it would become strong, durable, and infinitely more difficult to counter, the NLF created a communication structure far beyond any simple

propaganda organization, and plunged to depths far below more surface acceptance of a message by an individual. In the hands of the agit-prop cadres, the social movement as a communicational device made these 7 contributions to the NLF cause:

1. It generated a sense of community, both by developing a pattern of political thought and behavior appropriate to the social problems of the rural Vietnamese village in the midst of sharp social change, and by providing a basis for group action that allowed the individual villager to see that his own efforts could have meaning and effect.

2. As an organizational armature, it mobilized the people, generating discontent where it did not exist, exacerbating and harnessing it where it did, and increasing, especially at the village level, the saliency of all the NLF appeals.

3. It altered to at least some degree villager information input, perception of the world, attitude toward government and daily actions in and out of the village. It changed underlying beliefs and even caused villagers to do things to their own disadvantage.

4. In a self-reinforcing manner, it fostered integration of the NLF belief system, turning heterogeneous attitudes into homogeneous ones. The social facilitation or interstimulation which resulted canalized and intensified village feelings, reactions, and aims. Thus it came to pass that even when the NLF organization turned coercive, as it finally did, members continued to hold imported and alien values and norms.

5. It greatly facilitated the NLF's efforts to polarize belief, stereotype anti-NLF forces, and generally shift villager attention in the directions chosen by the NLF leadership. As does any social organization, it caused the villager to rationalize more easily, being influenced by those around him. Since resistance to suggestion, that is critical judgement, is less within a group, it caused him to accept spurious arguments more easily, allowed him to succumb more quickly to emotional appeals or personal appeals by the cadres and the village NLF leaders. Once critical judgement was impaired, the villager soon came to confuse desire with conviction.

6. Once momentum in the group was developed, the group itself tended to restrict the freedom of expression to the sentiment acceptable to the NLF-created group norms. The individual became submerged, the group became the unit, and great social pressure was brought to bear against the deviant, thus achieving the ultimate NLF objective: A self-regulating, self-perpetuating revolutionary force.

7. Finally, because it helped cut social interaction and communication with the social system represented by the GVN, it isolated the villagers and heightened the sense of conflict between the two systems.

The significance of the social movement as a communication device, the successes it has delivered to date to the NLF, and the danger it poses to other developing nations, cannot be stated too strongly.

It follows, therefore, that neither military operations nor civic-action programs—important as they are—can themselves reverse the NLF tide. The Organizational Weapon promises the communists victory. Only the counter organizational effort can turn back this tide. This means the creation in Vietnam—or anywhere else where danger lies—of viable organizations that reach from the capital to the village, organizations that provide a payoff to the villagers, either in material or non-material personal benefits, organizations which once established legitimately can be used as channels of communication. And since the proper counter organizational weapon pays off in real and material benefits, the doubly attractive thing about it is that both the individual and his country gain in a multitude of ways, above and beyond simply halting communist aggression.