IMPLEMENTING THE VILLAGE SYSTEM

The strength of the GVN in the final years before American withdrawal in 1973 has long been in dispute. Some contemporary observers believed that the Communist movement in South Vietnam had been fatally undermined during these years. People who could remember the insecurity and destruction of the first phase of the war were particularly bewitched by the apparent calm that had spread over the countryside. “The most dramatic event taking place thus far in the 1970s is the increase in security in the South Vietnam countryside,” wrote Allan E. Goodman, a seasoned observer of the South Vietnamese scene, in 1971. “For most of the 1960s the debate over security centered on how to measure the little that existed.” By the early 1970s, the amount of security achieved was “no longer a subject of official debate.”

Many other observers were similarly bullish. Sir Robert Thompson later wrote that by 1970 the fruits of pacification and Vietnamization were “unassailable.” The Brit had shifted from leveling stark criticisms of the U.S. effort during the Johnson administration to now warning that the main threat under Nixon was a “comprehensibility gap.” The public simply did not understand how well the war in South Vietnam was now going. William Colby has likewise stated that “we had won the guerrilla war” by the time of the Easter Offensive in 1972. John Vann—never one to shrink from telling truth to power—gave his own upbeat assessment of the security situation to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in 1970. Vann by this point headed CORDS in the entire Mekong Delta, the most populous area of South Vietnam. The area saw a “rather tremendous improvement in security”
over 1969, he claimed, and it was now possible to drive safely to any provincial
capital during the daytime. Cao Van Vien remembered after the war that “con-
ditions in the countryside radically improved and prospects for the future were
never so bright” as in the years after 1969.

Even officials in the British Embassy in Saigon, who had often been skeptical
of American claims of progress, felt change blowing in the wind. In May 1969,
the British defense attaché reported that the military position of the Communists
in the Mekong Delta was “weak,” allowing pacification “to continue its progress.”

A review of events in South Vietnam during 1971 prepared by the British Embassy
noted that at year’s end the two southern military regions—which contained Sai-
gon and the Mekong Delta—“were, broadly speaking, secure.” The report con-
cluded that for South Vietnam, 1971 was a “good year” in which “a tolerable level of
security” had been achieved. A reply sent back from London gave South Vietnam
“a sporting chance” of survival. All of this seems to lend some credence to Lewis
Sorley’s claim that the war “was won” at some point in “late 1970.”

But in guerrilla warfare and nation building, surface appearances can be
deceiving. As Goodman noted as early as 1971, the debate over the extent to
which apparent security had been achieved in South Vietnam gave way to
another debate: what exactly this appearance of security meant, and whether it
was significant. The question rested on the distinction between pacification and
nation building that Thompson, Vann, and others had noted in their criticisms of
the war effort in earlier times. Pacification could bring apparent security through
a military occupation of the rural areas by South Vietnamese and American
forces, but nation building was much more nebulous. While many contempo-
rary observers and subsequent historians have focused on the apparent calm that
spread across South Vietnam during these years, this chapter instead probes the
extent to which the GVN put down durable roots among its population.

Crucial evidence of the GVN’s failure to do so comes not only from American
observers but also Vietnamese. During the final years of the war, a branch of
GVN inspectors produced “pacification research reports” based on surveys of
dozens or hundreds of rural villagers on a particular issue. Vietnamese inspectors
would enter hamlets and villagers incognito, unaccompanied by any American,
and question the locals about their views toward issues such as taxation, the draft,
and corruption. They were often able to elicit a great deal of criticism toward the
GVN, which was more revealing of rural attitudes in the final years of the war
than the surface calm that pervaded South Vietnam. Taken with other evidence,
these surveys call into question any claim that the GVN had carried out success-
ful nation building in the latter years of the war.

After the 1968 offensives, the GVN’s control and administration of the coun-
tryside via a network of province and district chiefs were much more secure than
they had been during the period of high-intensity warfare from 1965 to 1968. Yet the failure to engender enthusiasm toward the GVN throughout the villages of South Vietnam called into question whether CORDS’s nation-building strategy could work even in the absence of large-scale violence or enemy activity. CORDS officials had hoped that they would be able to foster what they called a “friendly infrastructure” in each village that, much like the NLF’s infrastructure, would act as GVN partisans and oppose the Vietnamese Communist movement actively without the need for an “occupation” by the ARVN. But on the eve of the Easter Offensive, by which time CORDS had nearly been dissolved and the U.S. presence in South Vietnam was in its final months, this dream still seemed far away.

Theory and Practice

Before the creation of CORDS, training for American nation builders had been limited or nonexistent. Some of the Tigers had picked up at least some Vietnamese language ability from previous service in the country, whether it was with an NGO or in the military. But Fraleigh and Phillips had placed more emphasis on a can-do attitude than on local knowledge, and they had frequently sent recruits into the field essentially unprepared. One American was dispatched to Kien Hoa after only one hour of language training. Fraleigh and Phillips had hence sent the Tigers off with a broad remit to improve the social, economic, and political life of the rural population by making GVN local government more effective and responsive to popular needs, but without extensive formal training. The lack of training not only meant that the Tigers would have difficulty understanding either Vietnamese rural society or their counterpart, but also meant that they had a wide degree of autonomy and were not working according to some centralized plan or program.

As a large bureaucracy that prized central direction and unity of purpose, CORDS had more intensive training needs. In April 1967 the Vietnam Training Center (VTC) had been inaugurated in Washington to provide a standardized education to Americans from various agencies who would soon become part of CORDS. Some two thousand Americans passed through the VTC during the course of its existence. As part of the Foreign Service Institute, the VTC provided courses up to ten months long in which future province and district advisers took classes in Vietnamese language, history, and culture, the theory and practice of countering revolutionary war, and their role within CORDS. It was a testament to the scale and significance of the American nation-building effort in South Vietnam that an educational institution dedicated to understanding this one country was founded. Nothing of its kind has existed before or since in the American foreign policy establishment.
The purpose of the VTC was to equip trainees to understand Vietnamese rural society, the Vietnamese Communist movement, and the government they would be aiming to shape. Course attendees read texts on the culture and history of South Vietnam and received lectures from luminaries such as Thompson and Fraleigh. In theory, trainees could also learn about the province to which they would be assigned by talking to personnel who previously served there and reading province-specific literature. In reality, however, trainees often did not find out their assignment until they arrived in-country, making this aspect of the course of dubious use. “I believe it is a basic mistake to regard Vietnam as an homogeneous area for which detailed directives and procedures can be established at central level and stipulated to be applicable throughout,” remarked James Megellas, leader of CORDS in II Corps in 1970. “Even within any specific CTZ [Corps Tactical Zone] the individual provinces have enough differences to preclude this type of direction being feasible at regional level, much less on a country-wide basis.” If the new advisers were lucky, they might overlap with their predecessor long enough to pick up information on the local situation from him, but this was not always the case. Given the differences between provinces in terms of their social and economic condition, the quality of the local GVN government, and the disposition of the local NLF organization, there was a steep learning curve for advisers. Yet during their training, advisers often had no idea whether they were going to be deployed to an almost entirely peaceful province like An Giang or a raging war zone adjacent to North Vietnam.

Reactions to the course were mixed. Although language training was a large part of the course, few advisers were able to engage in much more than small talk when they arrived in South Vietnam. Many province chiefs spoke English or French, but advisers without facility in the Vietnamese language were unable to speak with the ordinary villagers whom they were supposedly there to understand and help. Nor was the language training always in the appropriate dialect. “Johnny” described the “shock” he had arriving in Quang Tri Province in 1965 and discovering that the locals spoke “such a rude rural central dialect.” General Thi’s regionalist uprising that broke out in early 1966 must only have heightened his discomfort at speaking the dialect of the capital. Given that it was technically possible for advisers to get by speaking to their counterparts in English or French, it was rarely possible for them to be spared from their jobs long enough to develop fluency in the Vietnamese language. Even the legendary John Paul Vann requested to take leave to develop his poor Vietnamese language skills in 1971—and had his request denied.

In the view of “Brad,” a USAID official who was embedded directly in the staff of a GVN agency in 1966 and thus saw the relationship from the other side, the poor standard of English spoken by GVN officials often led their American
advisers to view them as intellectually inferior.\textsuperscript{18} One Saigon-based adviser who traveled many provinces as a program auditor reported being “terrifically” impressed in the mid-1960s that “you could go to practically any province and you found people who spoke English.” While urbane GVN officials like Nguyen Duc Thang were accorded respect for their linguistic skills, those Vietnamese who could not match them were looked down upon.\textsuperscript{19} This naturally piqued their South Vietnamese counterparts, for whom speaking good English had little obvious connection to their aptitude at navigating their own country. “The Americans tended to have greater confidence in those of us who spoke good English,” remarked Tran Van Don, adding that this was “hardly a qualification for military command or denoting special ability, courage, or integrity.”\textsuperscript{20} Even the language with which Americans were trying to influence their Vietnamese counterparts was thus politicized and charged. Thomas Barnes, the head of CORDS in the populous Mekong Delta in 1971, even felt it necessary to issue a directive banning advisers from speaking in pseudo-English “baby talk” to their counterparts because it demeaned the relationship.\textsuperscript{21}

Another problem was the fact that being unable to speak Vietnamese meant that the range of local perspectives advisers were exposed to was limited to those of English-speaking or perhaps French-speaking Vietnamese, who tended to be highly educated and from urban backgrounds. With rare exceptions, this meant that the ease with which advisers could converse with the Vietnamese was inversely proportional to the degree of connection of their interlocutor to rural society. Vien believed that all province and district advisers “should have been required to speak the language too, because this was the only means of obtaining the insight in the local problems of pacification and developing the kind of rapport with the local people that was conducive to success.”\textsuperscript{22}

Although the Vietnamese language element of a VTC education was wanting, some trainees emerged believing themselves to be fluent in the language of revolutionary warfare. A rural development adviser who attended the course in 1967 remembered it as his first introduction to the idea that insurgencies had political causes and needed political solutions. Despite his recent introduction to the topic, he felt that “if a person took any interest in the course at all that it became clear to him fairly soon what causes an insurgency and how you must deal with it.”\textsuperscript{23} Others found arriving in province for the first time to be hugely discomfiting and soon had a more modest view of their capabilities. One PSA who served on the central coast in 1968 found that he had not really been able to imagine the reality of “what you’re going to be doing in Asia” from the comfort of a classroom.\textsuperscript{24} An assistant province adviser who had received six months of training, including five months working on the language, remembered: “When you first get out to a province you are bewildered, you don’t know what on earth
you’re going to do. You really haven’t been told, except in a general sort of way, exactly what it is you’re supposed to do. Some advisers complained of more quotidian experiences of culture shock of the sort that American travelers abroad have long voiced. “Felix,” a naturalized Filipino American, found he could not distinguish between the various provinces of South Vietnam upon arrival “since they all seemed to have similar names.” He also complained of being serviced by “shoeshine boys” and obliged to pay them whether he wanted to or not. Although Felix felt that his previous experience of living in the Philippines had helped cushion him from the culture shock of arriving in South Vietnam, most American recruits had not had similar preparation.

Some of the Tigers had worked in the same province for years and gained an understanding of Vietnamese language, culture, and history. CORDS instead operated on the principle that older individuals with no experience of Vietnam could be taught the necessary minimum. “Johnny,” the adviser who only discovered he spoke the wrong dialect upon arriving in Quang Tri, replaced a Tiger who had been in the province for three and a half years. Fraleigh had believed that young minds were the most adaptable to new cultures and less prone to be prescriptive and rigid in their view of what was to be done to aid GVN local governments. By contrast, many of the inductees to the VTC were already experienced professionals whose worldviews were more difficult to mold through several months of training. For instance, although experts in “cross-cultural communication” were retained in teaching positions, many course attendees believed they had little to be taught in this area.

An example can be found in the VTC’s attempts to mold trainees’ view of the Vietnamese peasantry. During training, advisers read a document titled “The Vietnamese Peasant: His Value System.” The document was full of sweeping generalizations such as the supposed fact that “the peasant likes war movies, perhaps because he can identify with them.” Given the suffering and dislocation that the war had inflicted on many parts of rural South Vietnam, this statement served only to illustrate the distance between the authors of the document and their subject. The overall thrust of the document was that peasants lived in a harmonious if primitive society before the advent of the Communist movement, and even since then they were uninterested in any ideological commitment or higher concern than their own physical safety and prosperity. It reflected USOM’s materialist view of peasant motivations, perhaps unsurprisingly, given the VTC was operated by USAID. Trainees were told that “the greatest majority of people will go to whichever side they believe will give them a better deal.” The idea that peasants might make a positive commitment to the ideals of the Communist movement—or even its front organizations—was disregarded. The document encouraged trainees to view peasant grievances as manufactured by
the Communist movement, as “normally there is little friction between the peasant and the landlord,” a statement that reflected the idealistic and ignorant view of rural society taken by many urban South Vietnamese. Even had the document avoided inaccurate generalizations, its usefulness would have been limited, as can be seen by imagining an analogous document titled “The American Town Dweller: His Value System.”

While some advisers seemed to internalize this stock portrait of the Vietnamese peasant, others proved resistant. This was not necessarily an advantage, as many advisers seemed to believe that no special knowledge of Vietnamese culture or history was needed to understand its people. One took comfort by assuring himself that the Vietnamese farmer “probably wants the same thing that the farmer in Georgia or Alabama wants.” Another adviser thought it fruitful to consider that the Vietnamese were akin to “American Jews” rather than the “Negro or Mexican sub-cultures” because the Vietnamese were merit oriented. Such analogies between Vietnamese society and the American society that advisers were more familiar with often became absurd. An assistant province adviser not fluent in Vietnamese even went so far as to claim that because America was a “basically democratic society” without class distinctions, there was a wider gap between Vietnamese villagers and GVN officials than there was between U.S. advisers and those same villagers.

It was certainly convenient for Americans to believe they understood the villagers without the need for communication, given that the vast majority of advisers could not speak Vietnamese. Still others drew more realistic conclusions, and developed a healthy appreciation of the limits of their own knowledge. One U.S. Army officer with three years of experience as a PSA by 1971 rejected easy generalizations about the Vietnamese and felt that true wisdom lay in knowing what you did not know. “Show me a person who says he understands the Vietnamese,” he commented, “and I’ll show you a person who only thinks he does.”

“Earl,” a trainee who held less-than-progressive views on race relations in the United States, espoused careful sensitivity to the worldview of the Vietnamese. “I haven’t had any cross-cultural problems myself. I realize that the Vietnamese act and react differently than we do,” he explained. “If you go from Mississippi to Indiana you will find people act and react differently. I think if your idea is to go over there and help these people and you’re really interested in people, you’re not going to have these problems.”

Some advisers avoided the generalizations that lumped all villagers together either as simple farmers akin to their American cousins or as devious and selfish egotists, instead gaining an appreciation of the complex social and political structure of the villages and provinces in which they worked. The most sophisticated of all realized that this complex structure often had no overlap with the
official GVN power structures with which they interacted. In 1970, a deputy PSA in Phu Yen lamented that “there are many undercurrents and back room politics that brew within the Province that no American really knows about or understands.” He considered it difficult to know what the people really thought of the GVN, because all he saw was “what the Vietnamese wants us to see.” Edward Lansdale, who served in various roles in South Vietnam between 1954 and 1968, believed that most American advisers did not have a sufficient understanding of the “rather highly organized” informal political structure that existed in each district and village. While Americans tended to interact with GVN officials more than anyone else, there was often little overlap between the formal structures of GVN power and the traditional community leaders in the village.

Lansdale had spent many years in South Vietnam to develop this understanding, but the short tour of the typical adviser provided little scope in which to do so. South Vietnamese officials themselves complained that the tours of American advisers were far too short to gain a comprehensive understanding of the country and its problems. According to Vien, “not only was Vietnam a totally alien country, the nature of the war being fought was also unfamiliar to American military experience.” One year was not long enough for advisers to acquire the experience necessary to operate at maximum usefulness, and Vien would have preferred they came back for multiple tours—preferably in the same area. But with problems attracting and retaining personnel, CORDS was never able to institute such a system.

When combined with the problems, explored in previous chapters, of influencing their counterparts, the difficulty of understanding rural South Vietnam meant the typical CORDS advisory tour was confusing, confounding, and short. Advisers faced innumerable problems both in understanding their environment and influencing it. The learning curves involved in communicating with the Vietnamese, learning about the local area, and building a rapport with their counterparts often meant advisers were never able to become even minimally effective in a one-year tour. Given CORDS’s need for relatively large amounts of personnel and the limited time available in which to train them, there was only so much the VTC could do to alleviate these problems. In attempting to implement the village system in the final years of the war, the limitations of what individual American nation builders could accomplish became obvious.

**Self-Government**

The first of the “three selfs” that advisers were supposed to implement in rural South Vietnam was self-government. In line with the general thrust of CORDS
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and GVN policy between the Tet and Easter offensives, the push for self-government involved not just a decentralization of power from the central GVN but also a mobilization of people and resources from below. A village government with an elected chief was, in theory, at the center of these reforms. Under Colby, CORDS sought to persuade the GVN to carry out a broad democratization of the village level of government while simultaneously investing more power in it. This meant institutionalizing the “village system” whereby villages would raise more taxes, direct their own local security operations, and carry out development projects. CORDS’s view was that the new breed of village governments should be given latitude to make mistakes, and that if they did, then their constituents could vote them out. The emergence of village governments with a mandate from their people would allow popular aspirations to be met and finally, it was hoped, allow the people to identify with at least one organ of GVN governance.

Such a sweeping change did not go unchallenged. Province and district officials who were used to controlling the security forces and resources that were now to be devolved to village chiefs did not always give up such control gracefully, and the central GVN in Saigon likewise had doubts about some aspects of CORDS’s passion for decentralization. And while CORDS and the GVN organized an industrial-scale training effort for hamlet and village officials, several years was clearly too short a time in which to revolutionize previous patterns of governance in rural South Vietnam. By the time the Easter Offensive struck in 1972, causing a significant backsliding in the name of security needs, the results of the push for self-government were fragile.

U.S. officials had long seen the GVN’s weakness at village level as a key impediment to nation building. Although the ravages of war—along with the economic opportunities the war bought to the cities—had created an unprecedented degree of mobility among the rural population, most villagers had little experience of any political unit larger than their home village. The province and even the district were remote, alien institutions—and Saigon much more so. As a handbook for CORDS advisers explained, “It is the village/hamlet official, not a faraway district or province chief, who personifies the Government of Vietnam to the rural citizens.” What experience most villagers had of the direct hand of Saigon was limited to marauding bands of security forces controlled either by the province chief or the local ARVN division commander, and against whom local village and hamlet officials had little redress. Empowering these local officials would allow them to respond to local needs and give them a voice that might be levied against the ARVN and higher levels of the GVN in response to villagers’ needs. CORDS accordingly wanted to use the village level of government as a vital intermediary between the rural people and Saigon. “We should sort of complete the circuit between some form of Vietnamese government and the
people it serves as well as governs,” one adviser explained. “Until we provide some evidence that the government’s concerned about its constituents, I think we’ll just have an open circuit. So we’re trying to plug this in and make it a flow of information, a flow of loyalty.”

Vann hoped that the new hamlet and village authorities would stand up for the interests of villagers and in so doing come into conflict with the central GVN, forcing it to “mend its ways.” As we saw in the last chapter, this focus on constructing a pro-government village administrative structure as an intermediary between the people and the central government accorded with the thinking of many European theorists. As Thompson described in 1969, the “needs of the people” should come up through the village administrative machine “while the benefits went down.” GVN documents likewise talked of the need to free the rural people from “venal and tyrannical officials” by restoring “the vital forces and prestige of the villages and hamlets through the democratic activities carried out by the local people.”

These were the views that individuals like Chau and Nguyen Be had been advocating within the GVN for some time, and under the village system they saw them come closest to implementation. On April 1, 1969, Thieu rearranged village government by issuing Decree 45. Village and hamlet governance had previously been governed by a decree set forth in late 1966 that provided for a significant degree of higher-level control over village affairs. Villages could not make loans, spend money on development projects, set tax rates, or control any security forces within the village. The village council could not even move its office without the permission of a ministry in Saigon. On the basis of this earlier structure, elections were held in 939 villages and 5,450 hamlets in South Vietnam during the spring of 1967, constituting less than half of those in the country. NLF terrorism and the 1968 offensives subsequently killed many officials or drove them to seek refuge in the government-controlled cities. Before the APC, only sporadic replacement elections were held. The expansion of security and government control from late 1968 onward was followed both by the reform of village powers in Decree 45 and a renewed push to hold elections. By early 1970, 95 percent of villages in the country had elected administrations, and by January 1972 there were only sixty-six villages out of 2,162 that did not have an elected government in residence. Decree 45 also gave village administrations new powers in the realm of security and development.

These measures—especially the control of security forces and access to development resources—were an unprecedented grant of authority to villages. Village councils would face the judgment of the electorate every three years on whether they had used this authority wisely. Copying the Communist movement’s practice of “communalism,” the GVN also sought to educate and shape its community
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leaders to serve its own ends, while staying in touch with their own people. An intensive training course was set up at the National Training Center (NTC) at Vung Tau, still run by Nguyen Be. Village and hamlet officials took their place at the center alongside other “GVN infrastructure cadre” for a course that included both technical and political education. Copying the language of the Communist movement, Colby described this as the process by which the GVN’s cadres were “indoctrinated.” Over four weeks, officials were trained in leadership, paramilitary organization, and self-defense and given an overview of a variety of technical topics such as rural electrification, how to run post offices, and how to organize the village budget. Political education covered such topics as “what is democracy?” “the role of the Allies in the RVN struggle,” and “Communist plots regarding the cease-fire, peace-talks and counter-measures to be taken.” Some 31,000 officials and cadres received training at the NTC during 1969, and a further 37,322 in 1970. They then returned to their home villages and hamlets to become the backbone of the GVN “friendly infrastructure.”

Yet from the time of the promulgation of Decree 45, the GVN proved unwilling to push this policy of decentralization too far. Nor was it easy to force province and district chiefs to give up their prerogatives. While the village chief’s power and prestige appeared strong under the new system, in reality he was hemmed in by powerful deputies who were appointed by the province chief. The village chief’s command of the local militia ran through both a deputy for security and a military commissioner, and he did not have a free hand in appointing either. While the village chief nominated an individual for the position of deputy for security, in reality he served at the pleasure of the province chief. Meanwhile, implementing instructions sent to province chiefs some time after the promulgation of Decree 45 and without CORDS input mandated that the village chief had to appoint the senior militia platoon leader as military commissioner. These old hands, who had close ties to the district and province chiefs who had formerly appointed and commanded them, retained operational control of their units while serving as commissioners. “In summary,” a CORDS report complained, “this arrangement seems likely to change the outward appearance while preserving the status quo.” Two months after Decree 45 was promulgated in 1969, the head of the Pacification Studies Group warned that village control of local security forces remained “mythical.”

Nor did the GVN’s implementing instructions extol the virtues of decentralization. Instead they pointed out to province chiefs that villages had already “enjoyed a liberal grant of authority” under earlier decrees and now needed only to be made “more effective.” By making the issue the effectiveness of local administration rather than portraying decentralization as an inherent good, the GVN left a substantial leeway for province and district officials to rationalize
their own continued involvement in village and hamlet government. Colby
remembered how one village chief whom he met at the National Training Center
listened “with near disbelief” to the idea, expounded by Nguyen Be, that a village
chief should have the authority to decide on the expenditure of development
funds. “The idea,” Colby wrote solemnly, “brought tears to his eyes.” Yet in real-
ity, district and province chiefs often did not give up their powers so easily. Many
retained the paternalistic view of villagers typical of their class—and also, as we
have seen, typical of American training documents—and refused to decentralize
power. Conversely, a more centralized system was certainly effective for at least
one group of people—namely, the province and district officials who were able to
benefit from the corruption that it enabled. This gave them another disincentive
to enthusiastically pursue the implementation of the “village system.”

Corruption remained endemic throughout South Vietnam, even at the height
of CORDS’s influence. While it is impossible to determine its exact scale, espe-
cially insofar as it was carried out in petty ways at province level and below, there
is reason to suspect it was very widespread indeed. Measures against petty cor-
rupption were less than impressive, and most CORDS advisers did not consider
it a proper subject of their attention. “The American attitude seems to be based
on the assumption that corrupt practices are part of their way of life and must
be accepted,” stated one long-serving official, “Frank,” in 1967. “Objections are
based not upon kind but degree. A certain level is permissible [sic], but more
than this calls for corrective action. I subscribe to this view myself.” Frank saw
10 percent of cash or 25 percent of construction materials as an unacceptable
level of corruption, whereas others saw 10 percent cash as acceptable. Such
views were widespread, and advisers routinely normalized corruption. A hand-
book for advisers noted in 1971 that corruption was the “pervasive vice” of Viet-
namese administration and was not to be dealt with through “denunciations and
counter-denunciations.”

Vann, a key architect of the village system, differentiated between “good cor-
rupption” and “dirty corruption.” Many other American advisers drew a distinc-
tion between “necessary” corruption and that which aimed at making individu-
als conspicuously wealthy. This distinction underlay the words of a USAID
employee in 1968, who stated that corruption was a “cancer” but also “the
lubricant by which everything moves.” Remove the lubricant, he warned, and it
“would be like removing all of the grease from a machine.” Several structural
factors encouraged this view. The first was the extremely low level of salaries for
GVN officials, combined with the high rate of inflation that afflicted South Viet-
nam during the war years. A 1968 study found that the average province chief had
a monthly deficit equivalent to 18 percent of expenses, while for district chiefs the
figure was nearly 29 percent. Thieu had himself explained corruption as a result
of low salaries, providing a justification from the top for officials to engage in it.65 This gave rise to a second structural cause of corruption, which came in the form of demands placed on officials lower down the GVN food chain to supplement the income of their superiors. Recalling the period of U.S. escalation, one former province representative said: “The District Chief was like a little god in these districts and they were not above lining their pockets at anybody’s expense.”66 Playing god was not an easy habit to get out of, and village and hamlet officials who attended the training course at Vung Tau frequently complained that district chiefs demanded money out of their budgets. This, in turn, required that the village officials engage in corruption of their own, for instance by charging for the issuance of documents that were supposed to be free.67

Vietnamese officials, even the honest ones, often bristled at sweeping accusations of corruption that implied it was somehow an ingrained Vietnamese trait. Instead, they pointed to the structural factors that made it unavoidable for many officials. They also blamed the Americans for having a corrupting influence on Vietnamese society and government. “What creates corruption?” asked “Anh,” the NIA-trained official. “The Americans,” he answered. Anh pointed to the twin impacts of high inflation caused by the U.S. presence and the “new demands” for luxuries like air conditioning that the Americans had brought with them to the country. Vietnamese officials, he said, are “underpaid” and had to “steal somewhere to survive and to raise their families.” On the other hand, there were also those—mainly high-ranking officials—who “steal to live very luxuriously,” which in turn made “average people ambitious or jealous and want to be equal.” Only systemic reforms could stop corruption, and in the meantime Americans had to be aware of its causes and stop casting aspersions on the average Vietnamese official. “What we cannot accept is the distance and the distrust,” he complained. “I cannot. Many of my friends cannot.”68

Yet as inflation continued to run rampant in South Vietnam, this source of distrust remained, and it was still common in 1971 for province and district officials to demand money from village budgets to meet their own costs—legitimate and otherwise.69 Advisers who were aware of factors such as these tended to see corruption as a practical rather than a moral issue. Yet the money to keep the system of official corruption oiled had to come from somewhere, and it was the rural population who eventually bore the costs via myriad forms of petty graft. As inflation continued to run rampant throughout the final years of the war without commensurate salary increases, the problem remained. Given these factors and the limited options that American advisers had to respond to instances of corruption, it is little wonder that one of the last CORDS advisers to leave the country in 1973 warned that corruption was still a problem across the delta. There had been only “lip service” paid to corruption, he complained, and now
he wanted to see “heads roll.” Yet with CORDS closing down imminently, the chances of the United States providing the pressure that would fulfill his wishes seemed remote.

Pacification research reports produced by GVN surveyors underlined the pervasiveness of corruption even after years of efforts by CORDS advisers and attempted reforms of the village system. In the wake of the Easter Offensive, opportunities for corruption increased as villagers attempted to escape renewed draft calls. A report in the province of Chau Doc in 1972 found that security agencies would falsely certify villagers as undercover agents so they could avoid the draft, or simply take money from draft dodgers to look the other way. The GVN surveyor concluded that the corruption situation in the province was “grave” and added: “The people feel the present government is bad, since all district or province authorities are more or less corrupt.” Because the proceeds of corruption were shared equally between low and high officials, who were “tightly organized,” the system seemed impossible to break. According to the surveyor, central government inspectors sent to address the situation would only have their heads turned by “wine, nice girls or expensive gifts.” Another survey in Bac Lieu after the Easter Offensive noted that many respondents believed that corruption was still driving villagers into the arms of the NLF, especially those who could not afford draft deferments.

The persistence of corruption was one example of how CORDS had not been able to fundamentally transform the attitudes of individuals at all levels of local government. The structural changes that had been introduced with the “village system” worked only if they were observed in the localities, which they often were not. The problem of “interference in village affairs by higher echelons of government” remained in 1970, with precious little time left to tackle it. The effort to indoctrinate hamlet and village officials in their new duties and powers also began to lose steam after an initial push in 1969. Despite a U.S. preference that ever-increasing numbers of local officials attend the Vung Tau training center, nearly 50 percent of those picked to attend in 1971 chose not to go. Many saw their positions as community leaders imperiled by spending a long period away from the village. Local loyalty came above the duty owed to the GVN, which still seemed an alien and faraway institution. By carrying out its recruitment, training, and indoctrination locally, the Communist movement was hence not only at a practical but also a symbolic advantage. Village and hamlet chiefs from Annam, much of which was a stronghold of the Communist movement and where regionalist suspicion of Saigon was widespread, had particularly poor attendance records at Vung Tau. The areas that had long had the worst record of integration with the GVN and high levels of Communist support remained the most untouched by the self-government program.
In such circumstances, it was not clear that CORDS’s post-Tet programs had produced anything more than surface change in either the quality of local government or its responsiveness to the people. It was difficult for advisers, few of whom were equipped to truly understand the political situation in the villages in their area of remit, to even tell. Lansdale believed that most American advisers did not have a sufficient understanding of the “rather highly organized” informal political structure that existed in each district and village. While Americans tended to interact with GVN officials more than anyone else, there was often little overlap between the formal structures of GVN power and the traditional community leaders in the village.75 Lansdale made his comments in 1968, before village and hamlet elections had been held in most areas. Yet given that district chiefs retained tight control over who was eligible to stand in these elections, in many areas the informal and formal power structures continued to have little crossover. In the most insecure areas, such as Binh Dinh Province, local government was still little more than the facade Colby had considered it shortly after the APC. “Underneath this smattering of government,” noted CORDS officials who spent ninety days evaluating the situation in Binh Dinh in mid-1971, “is a society basically in enemy hands.”76

Even where security was better, high-level CORDS officials did not think that the GVN’s “friendly infrastructure” had genuinely won over the rural populace. In 1970, a deputy PSA in Phu Yen noted that it was difficult to know what the people really thought of the GVN because all he saw was “what the Vietnamese wants us to see.”77 This meant that American advisers were reliant for information on the implementation of the village concept from the very same GVN officials at district level and above whose own prerogatives were threatened by it. This only became more of a problem as American eyes and ears were withdrawn from the provinces. In late 1971, a briefer from CORDS told a committee that had gathered to consider the organization’s future that the GVN was still not “stuck together” at village, hamlet, and province level. Whether it ever would be “depends on how fast the GVN moves.” CORDS officials who worked on local government believed they needed to remain into the post-hostilities period.78 But with CORDS quickly being wound down, the organization had already passed the peak of its influence.

Consequently CORDS’s success in implementing self-government was spotty at best. District and province chiefs who were drawn from the ranks of ARVN officers and appointed to areas they knew nothing about continued to retain a great deal of control over village and hamlet affairs. The idea of introducing elected province chiefs was opposed by Thieu, and American officials also took the view that placing these local jobs in the hands of civilians could drastically weaken security and the effectiveness of the government at lower levels.79 Hence
even elected village and hamlet officials were hemmed in by military men from a vastly different social class appointed to positions above them. Unlike in the Communist system, the careers of these village officials were sharply delimited, and they were unable to rise above the position of village chief. Rather than being seen as the most important rung on a ladder from which power flowed from the bottom up, they remained essentially the local tools of a top-down, distant regime. For as long as ARVN officers with little experience of civil affairs but a great deal of experience in benefiting from corruption retained such power at district and province level, this situation was not likely to change, as efforts to implement the other two parts of the village system—self-defense and self-development—showed.

**Self-Defense**

One of the ways in which self-government was supposed to be actualized was through the idea of local self-defense. As seen by CORDS, the program had two main goals. The first was to spread security throughout rural South Vietnam at a time when regular military resources in the country were declining rapidly with the withdrawal of U.S. forces. By enlisting South Vietnamese citizens in the defense of their own provinces and villages, the self-defense program freed up the ARVN to take on the mobile offensive role in which the United States had previously taken the lead. The second goal of the program was political. It aimed to strengthen the ties of commitment between the people and the regime by enlisting the former in a national effort. The military training and equipment the regime gave the people symbolized its trust in them. Taken together, these political and military goals aimed “to confront and supplant the enemy’s political/military organization in every village with a deadly rival—a ‘friendly infrastructure.’”

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The value of this infrastructure would lie in its overt commitment to the GVN and equally overt rejection of the NLF. As a CORDS study noted of the People’s Self-Defense Force (PSDF) in 1969, “the political value of the program stems from the degree of commitment represented by the PSDF member at the time he chooses to join the PSDF for his self-defense.” Vann also agreed that the primary purpose of enlisting villagers in the PSDF program was not “for the expectation of having them fight the enemy,” but to have them “overtly committed to the side of the government.” The organization of a pro-GVN militia in a village symbolized the overt rejection of the NLF and made it more difficult for the latter to gain control, not least because they might have to shed the blood of a grassroots organization, as opposed to the ARVN, to do so.
FIGURE 9. Female “volunteers” of the People’s Self-Defense Forces patrol Kien Dien, a hamlet fifty kilometers from Saigon. Some PSDF participation was more voluntary than others.

National Archives identifier 541865, Miscellaneous Vietnam Photographs, Record Group 306, National Archives II at College Park, Maryland.

The organization was also intended to have a transformative impact on its participants. As Colby explained to a military audience: “They were pretty poor soldiers. They lost a few of the weapons and didn’t fight very hard, but they began to participate. They took that gun as a symbol that somehow the government both trusted them and looked to them to use the weapon in their own defense and not just to carry out the directives of the local authorities.”83 Once
again, Colby’s words sounded rather like they could have come from Thompson’s mouth. The Brit had likewise felt during the Malayan Emergency that armed opposition to the Malayan Communists could not be left solely to the military and police, but also had to involve the people. He had been a key proponent of efforts to arm the Chinese population in Malaya, noting that the point was “not that these units would make a great military contribution to the defeat” of the guerrillas “but that the readiness of the Chinese to commit themselves to an armed role and the Government’s trust in them would be a major factor” in the guerrillas’ “political defeat.”84 Roger Trinquier likewise had written that “for the inhabitant to elude the threats of the enemy, to cease to be an isolated target that no police force can protect, we must have him participate in his own defence.”85

Thompson and Trinquier were not the only ones to agree. Of all the nation-building programs that CORDS encouraged Saigon to embark upon, the expansion of territorial forces was the one in which GVN officials could see the clearest benefits. While they were concerned about inadvertently arming and training individuals who would eventually turn their guns on the GVN, the government stood to gain a much-bolstered security position from the program. The GVN’s preference for this aspect of nation building above all others was a natural result of its preference for measures that increased its control of the rural population. For CORDS too, it was logical to place great emphasis on measures that promoted security, which had been proven to be a prerequisite for reform measures. The self-defense program seemed to promise a way to provide security while avoiding the “occupation” of rural areas by outside forces that the architects of CORDS saw as the hallmark of previous pacification efforts. Now, the people themselves would provide security against the NLF’s local guerrillas, freeing main-force units to battle the enemy’s own large formations, preferably far from population centers.

The task of self-defense fell primarily on the shoulders of three separate forces in South Vietnam. Two of them—the Regional Forces (RF) and Popular Forces (PF)—were formed in 1964 to replace the Diem-era forces known as the Civil Guard and Self-Defense Corps. However, it was only in the changed conditions after 1968 that they began to make a sizable contribution to the war effort. The third force, the PSDF, sprang up informally on a small scale during the Tet Offensive and then was formalized with the GVN’s Mobilization Law of June 1968.

The three forces had different roles and missions, but they shared certain characteristics. First, they were recruited from the areas in which they served. As well as increasing the morale and motivation of the forces, this was designed to bolster the GVN’s nation-building goals. Local forces were considered less likely to perpetrate abuses against the civilian population, and they also had less firepower and therefore were not as prone to causing collateral damage. Shifting the
provision of security for population centers to territorial forces was designed to minimize the harm that came from the deployment of ARVN and U.S. forces in such roles. If this did not actively encourage people to identify with the GVN, it could at least avoid having them alienated by large combat operations. On the other hand, serving in the territorial forces was supposed to represent a positive commitment to the GVN on the part of those serving, bonding them to the government in a relationship that was both transactional and ideological. From a transactional perspective, they received payment in both cash and in kind for doing their jobs, and they received weapons with which they could defend their local communities. Those serving also received ideological indoctrination designed, in the spirit of “communalism,” to create a mental link between their service to their local communities and the greater national cause. Conversely, the GVN demonstrated its trust in rural citizens by arming them. The territorial forces were under the command of officials in the GVN’s civil chain of command, running from the province chief down to the district chief and, in theory, to the village chief. This meant that they supposedly would act in ways more attuned to the needs of the rural population than would either ARVN or U.S. main-force units.

For many years, the RF and the PF had been outgunned by the local NLF forces they were supposed to contend with. The territorial forces remained outmatched by the NLF during the 1968 offensives, with only 53 percent of RFs and 44 percent of PFs having firepower equal to or greater than the enemy units they faced in the second quarter of 1968. The parlous security situation and their own poor state of readiness inculcated a cautious mentality in the territorial forces from 1965 until the 1968 offensives, at which point many units were withdrawn from the countryside entirely to defend urban areas. Following this nadir, the United States embarked on a major program of modernization to increase both the equipment and training of the RFs and PFs. By mid-1969, 84 percent of RFs and 77 percent of PFs had equivalent or greater firepower than their local antagonists.

Local security was also augmented by the new force created during 1968, the PSDF. The PSDF were civilians who were enlisted in the direct defense of their own hamlet, mainly by acting as lookouts and to deter the surreptitious movement of small groups of guerrillas at night. They received only the slightest training and were armed with the obsolete weapons that the RF and PF were in the process of swapping out for more modern armaments. Colby, who had been involved in running a similar program during the Diem era, had long favored the distribution of weapons to local militias in this manner, as had Vann. The opportunity to urge this program on the GVN came during the 1968 offensives, when groups of citizens—primarily but not entirely in the
cities—began to request that the GVN arm them so that they could defend themselves against attack by the Communists. Many high-ranking GVN officials—led by Prime Minister Huong—were opposed to the large-scale distribution of weapons to citizens, believing that they would not be employed effectively and might fall into the hands of the enemy. Colby and Komer managed to overcome this resistance by pointing out that the NLF already had far superior weapons to the arms that they were proposing to give to the militia, and by focusing on the essentially political aspect of the program. They agreed with Huong that the militia would not be effective enough to battle the NLF, but that was not the point. As a CORDS document later explained, the point of the program was for both citizen and government “to make a public commitment to the other.”

This commitment, however, was not necessarily to be voluntary, as the GVN’s law implementing the program made clear. Huong having been won over, in June 1968 the GVN passed a Mobilization Law mandating that all citizens ages sixteen to seventeen and thirty-nine to fifty were to be enlisted into what became known as the PSDF. By 1972, some 3.5 million people—both men and women—were registered in the PSDF, of whom one million were classed as “combat PSDF.” The remaining 2.5 million “support PSDF” were trained in first aid, firefighting, and similar functions. Of the combat PSDF, only about half were armed.

The mandatory nature of this mobilization already undermined the political goals that CORDS had envisaged for the program. For the GVN, the rapid expansion of territorial forces was mainly about meeting a pressing security need, given U.S. troop withdrawals. From 1969 onward, the ARVN had to shoulder a greater part of the main-force war because of the progressive withdrawal of U.S. forces. In addition, as the GVN expanded its presence throughout South Vietnam between late 1968 and 1972, it was faced with the task of controlling and defending a larger population than ever before. In an environment of decreasing U.S. resources, the GVN would not have been able to establish an armed presence throughout all the country without enlisting greater manpower. A reliance on territorial forces was therefore central to the GVN’s security planning from 1969 onward. As Thieu explained in late 1970, the idea was that “local communities will care for themselves against local threats.” Within a limited zone around populated areas, RFs conducted offensive operations or assisted in static security, according to the wishes of the province chief. The PFs had a more static role, focusing on the security of their own villages while also contributing to defending important roads, waterways, and bridges. Finally, the PSDF remained within secure zones, where they acted as the eyes and ears of the other units. If confronted by an overwhelming force, they hid their weapons and acted like normal civilians, just as the NLF cadres would do.
Judged against their first goal of generating more manpower to secure rural South Vietnam and allowing the ARVN to replace departing U.S. forces, the “self-defense” forces performed admirably. Territorial force strength exceeded that of the ARVN by an average of just below 19 percent from 1970 to 1972. Casualty figures indicate that the territorials were bearing an even heavier share of the war than the ARVN in these years, with the combined losses of the RFs and PFs between 1968 and 1972 standing at 69,291, versus 36,932 for ARVN regulars. These figures reflect the Communist movement’s decision to place an emphasis on attacking the emerging grassroots infrastructure of the GVN, and also their success in doing so. Reflecting their own understanding of the way that political power was built from the bottom up and was most effective when rooted in rural communities, the movement had long placed a great emphasis on stopping the GVN from building its own “friendly infrastructure.” As one cadre told his captor after Tet: “If the GVN loses a province chief, it will appoint another to replace him. If it loses the Seventh Division, it will send in another one. At the grass-roots level, the hamlet chiefs, the interfamily group chiefs, and the security agents should all be swept away, and replaced by the Front’s own base-level organizations in order to gain the initiative.” As the historian David Elliott notes in citing this quote, this illustrates the view that grassroots officials and organizations rooted in a local community were both more valuable to the government and dangerous to the movement.

The enlistment of so many rural citizens into pro-GVN paramilitaries and militias had concrete results in terms of making it much harder for the NLF to operate in some areas, and in freeing up the ARVN to replace U.S. forces. One of the main successes of the self-defense program was in getting large units of ARVN and U.S. forces away from populated areas and thus preventing them from alienating the population through their actions. This accorded with CORDS’s general goal of attempting to shift away from a situation in which the GVN was viewed as an occupying military force. As the GVN’s nation-building plan for 1970 stated, “The Vietnamese villager fears military forces of both sides, since their operations constitute a threat to the safety of him and his family.” This recognized that for many villagers, “security” did not consist of the absence of the forces of the Communist movement but a general protection from physical harm.

The military campaign in support of the APC in 1969 had brought some of the most sustained violence of the war to populated rural areas. One example was Operation Speedy Express, which was launched by the U.S. Ninth Division in the Mekong Delta in late 1968 and early 1969. The Ninth Division was commanded by Major General Julian Ewell, who relentlessly pressured his subordinates to achieve a high body count. During the operation, the division claimed...
10,889 enemy killed while recovering only 748 weapons. It also achieved a highly unlikely kill ratio of 45:1. After the war, Ewell published a book titled *Sharpening the Combat Edge*, which explained that his division had operated on what he called the “constant pressure concept.” Small units engaged in relentless patrols accounted for 80–90 percent of the division’s kills, and many of them came during airborne operations. Many also occurred at night. Given the ease with which small units of NLF or NVA could conceal themselves or their weapons and thus avoid contact, this mode of operations gives further reason to suspect that many of the dead were civilians. Vann, who took over as DepCORDS in IV Corps in April 1969, estimated that twice as many civilians were being killed and wounded from air and artillery operations than were members of the NLF. The “relaxed” rules of engagement operating in the Mekong Delta had turned “very large areas of the country” into “free fire zones, whether or not announced as such,” he added. When it was time for the Ninth Division to withdraw from the delta, Vann was “absolutely delighted.”

By 1970, RFs and PFs made up 80 percent of total allied strength in IV Corps, meaning main-force units had largely withdrawn from the delta. The result, according to Vann, was that civilian casualties were a “fraction” of what they had been during the intense fighting of mid-1968. It was only the recruitment of territorial forces on a large scale that made this possible, and which largely—although by no means entirely—reduced the threat to villagers from allied firepower.

The territorial forces helped to make this transition away from “occupation” possible. Although the dramatically reduced tempo of combat in populated areas certainly made life safer for the majority of the country’s population, it is less clear that the goal of actively stimulating pro-GVN sentiment was achieved. Nor was Colby’s vision of autonomous self-governing villages that ran their own affairs, including security, much more than a pipe dream. Few village chiefs welcomed the responsibility of commanding the disparate militias, recognizing that they lacked the military experience and that diluting the civilian character of their role might make them the target of NLF assassination or abduction. According to the ARVN general who first commanded IV Corps and then had overall responsibility for territorial force development, the contribution of village chiefs to local defense was in fact “marginal.” Both U.S. and GVN officials believed that the continued effectiveness of the territorials depended on their being commanded by leaders with military experience of their own, which meant in reality they continued to be directed by the district chiefs. When the ideal of self-government conflicted with the best possible security arrangements, the latter retained priority.

Thus, although the territorial forces might not maraud around villages or call in air strikes on populated areas in the manner of U.S. and ARVN main forces,
they were still controlled by outsiders. This was especially so in the case of the RF. As Vietnamization continued, and manpower was in even greater demand to conduct large operations aimed at countering the NVA’s own big units, the RFs increasingly morphed into regular infantry who were deployed farther and farther from home. They were in this way deprived of their local character as Vietnamization proceeded. As early as May 1969, only 25 percent of them operated in or adjacent to their home village. While the figure for PFs was 80 percent, they were still often viewed as outsiders, because they answered to the district chief and not the village authorities. By 1971, PFs were also increasingly serving farther away from home. The sense of detachment of villagers from territorial forces that this could encourage was apparent by an incident investigated by the United States in Kien Hoa in May 1970. Following an audacious attack by up to two battalions of NLF—rare at this point in the war—a battle ensued in which twenty civilians and various ARVN and territorial forces were killed. Although the district chief and two PFs perished, they were “not considered as local losses” by the villagers—they were outsiders. In this case and many others like it, the GVN and its representatives continued to be seen as part of a system imposed by the regime from the top down and not a bottom-up expression of the community.

Even in the case of organized units of PFs and PSDFs serving in their home village, support for the GVN was often much lower than it appeared on paper by looking merely at the size of these forces. After the GVN’s Mobilization Law, eligible individuals in GVN-controlled villages faced the choice of serving either in the ARVN or the territorials. Volunteering for the latter would mean they stayed closer to home. “What we’re really doing is recruiting, by god, the local VC squad,” General George Jacobson explained to a skeptical Abrams in October 1969, as the force was undergoing rapid expansion. “And they want to stay home so bad that they’ll join the . . . PF to do it.” Bumgardner said as late as October 1971 that “there are a great many PSDF that are the enemy’s forces.” A Communist Party province leader in the delta confirmed this, telling his superiors that “over half the posts in the zone had secret contact with us, and the remainder, except for a few cruel tyrants, were passive and watched over the bricks [of their post] while drawing a salary.” That joining the GVN’s territorial forces was seen as an alternative to both the ARVN and the NLF can be seen by the example of Bac Lieu Province, where villagers who could not afford to bribe their corrupt local officials to avoid the ARVN draft and join the territorials instead fled to join the guerrillas. Where territorial forces were not simply just enemy forces incognito, apathy in the ranks was often the order of the day. In late 1971, the head of CORDS’s Territorial Security Directorate reported that the rapid expansion of territorial forces had led to a problem with motivation, especially the need for territorials to “identify” with the GVN if the program was to be deemed
The lack of such a feeling of identification suggested that although the self-defense program had helped to bolster security across South Vietnam, it had not succeeded in its political aims.

Another factor that made the large number of territorial forces less impressive than it appeared was that, as Truong noted, many villagers were “induced” to join the territorial forces. In areas where this happened—often meaning that former NLF members or sympathizers were dragooned into service—they could not be relied upon. One such chief in Binh Dinh said that only 30 percent of the local PF could be counted on to fight, and the PSDF could not be trusted at all because of their “close relationships” with the NLF. Although the extent of such accommodation cannot be reconstructed, it is indicative that throughout 1968 and 1969, only about half of PF platoons were considered by CORDS advisers as sufficiently aggressive in engaging the enemy. One Pacification Studies Group officer who spent a yearlong tour traveling the country assessing the performance of territorial forces concluded in February 1970 that the RF and PF remained “self oriented” and “extremely reluctant to engage the enemy.” The PSDF were even worse, especially considering their essentially political purpose. “If the
intent of the program is to produce large rosters and represent these people to be supporters of the Government, then the program is a success,” he noted. “If, on the other hand, the intent is as avowed, then the program is a failure. There is very little commitment to the Government in the program and all too frequently resentment is the case.”

In an attempt to strengthen the political aspects of the program through indoctrination, training courses were established for senior officers and cadres in the territorial forces. Abrams had joked that “if they’re just recruiting the local VC squad then maybe you don’t need to send them to the training center at all.” But as with other individuals whom the GVN aimed to make part of its “friendly infrastructure,” this training was much more political than it was tactical. PSDF leaders, for instance, received seven hours of training on village development, and six hours on “Communist plots during peace-talks and cease-fire and counter-measures to be taken.” By contrast, only two hours were spent on the subject of patrolling.

Yet as with the course for village and hamlet leaders, there was a limit to how much an individual’s outlook could be changed in a training course that averaged four to six weeks in length. Truong conceded that despite indoctrination, most RFs and PFs “lived far removed from central authority and were seldom conscious of the national cause,” but claimed that “being simple soldiers with rural origins” they were “easy to influence.” Yet even he believed that in the last analysis, most territorials fought “not for any political philosophy but for the practical reason that they did not want anyone to harm their wives, their children, their parents, or violate the properties that they had helped build over the years.” He could have added that often this harm came from ARVN forces—forces that might stay away from the villages after militia were established, providing another incentive for villagers to join. If this assessment by a high-ranking GVN general who oversaw the territorial forces is accurate, then it suggests that the political aims of the territorial force program went unrealized. Villagers who joined because they were forced to do so by local officials or because of a desire to be left alone with their families were not likely to be made into ardent supporters of the GVN by a short visit to a training center. Many PSDF leaders, supposedly standard-bearers for the GVN in their communities, refused to attend the training center at all.

Pacification research reports carried out by Vietnamese personnel confirmed that the self-defense program had failed in its political goals. As late as July 1972, a survey of An Giang Province found that the vast majority of respondents did not consider it their duty to join the ARVN and instead sought out positions in territorial units so they could stay close to their families. Corrupt local officials helped draft dodgers become PSDF members for a price, and those who could not afford it went into hiding. Given that An Giang Province was considered
a showcase of pacification with a weak Communist organization, this lack of willingness to serve the government and success at evading military service even here was a sign of how far the GVN still had to go in achieving genuine nation building. Only police operations, much resented by the local population, were successful at hoovering up recruits for the ARVN, a sign that the GVN was still relying on force rather than cooperation to achieve its aims.\textsuperscript{120} A survey of sixty-eight respondents in Ba Xuyen in the same month found that only fifteen were willing to either join the ARVN or have family members do so. Many villagers saw an inherent tension between serving their families and the GVN, which would require them to travel far from home and abandon their local responsibilities. The PSDF by contrast was seen as a way to “serve both the country and family,” meaning members opted for the most limited form of support for the GVN that was compatible with being left alone by draft enforcement officers.\textsuperscript{121} Numerous GVN surveys attested to a large increase in corruption as a result of renewed attempts at manpower mobilization after the Easter Offensive. This represented a double blow. As well as illustrating that the GVN had not been successful in moving to a paradigm of willing cooperation between the rural population and the government, it showed that the need to squeeze more manpower and resources out of the villages as American assets were withdrawn would only drive a larger wedge between the government and its citizens. While those who could afford it could buy their way out of their obligations to the government, the poor were forced to unwillingly shoulder them—or to flee to join the NLF.

Truong believed that the motivation of most members of the PSDF came from the fact they were simple villagers who were “adverse to anyone who disturbed the comfort of their natural surroundings.”\textsuperscript{122} But given the Communist movement’s method of building political power from the ground up, the GVN remained much more of an outsider in most villagers than the NLF was, as illustrated by the GVN’s continued difficulties at mobilizing manpower. Although the GVN had managed to gain physical control of much of the countryside, it had done little to move beyond the paradigm of “occupation” as the architects of the village system intended. This would have required both a great popular upswell of pro-GVN sentiment and a genuine system of local control of security forces. Neither of these occurred. Villagers knew it was wise to join the territorial units to avoid getting drafted into the ARVN, especially if the creation of PF and PSDF units kept friendly firepower away from their villages. Yet even Truong only claimed that “hundreds of thousands” of people had actively volunteered for the PSDF as opposed to being dragooned into service. In light of the fact that most U.S. advisers considered the total number of people the GVN claimed to have enrolled in the PSDF to be highly inflated, even this was a dubious assertion.\textsuperscript{123} Exactly what it meant to volunteer in a situation where service was known to be
mandatory is also questionable. Widespread cases of PF and PSDF units refusing to engage the enemy, or reaching accommodations with them, attest to this. In areas known for their long allegiance to the NLF, the GVN’s territorial forces simply became a way for guerrillas and cadres to bide their time while drawing a government salary. All of this helped to bring quiet and security to the countryside in the period between the 1968 offensives and the Easter Offensive. What it did not do was amount to genuine rural nation building.

Self-Development

The Village Self-Development Program (VSD) was, along with territorial security, the flagship of the CORDS nation-building effort between 1969 and 1972. Both were designed to be the means by which self-government was actualized, and to have benefits that went beyond their surface security and economic benefits. The VSD offered monetary assistance to villages to conduct small development projects if they could match the funds offered with contributions of their own. The contributions could come in the form of either cash, goods in kind, or labor, the latter being all that many of the poorest peasants who were thought to be the most open to NLF inducements possessed.

The projects included agricultural, fishery, and animal husbandry improvements through to the construction of schoolrooms, dispensaries, roads, bridges, and housing. But as far as CORDS and the central GVN were concerned, what mattered much more than the projects embarked upon was the process by which villagers planned and implemented them. For the ultimate goal of the VSD was to teach Vietnamese villagers what Alexis de Tocqueville called “the art of associating together.”124 At the start of every year, groups of villagers were encouraged to form pressure groups in favor of certain projects and make a case for how it would benefit the village. They then put their cases to the elected village council, which would ultimately decide which projects to pursue. Yet the purpose of the program was not the delivery of the aid projects per se, but rather to build a political connection between village governments and their constituents. The program was based on the idea that the peasantry was naturally apathetic and lethargic and had to be prodded by outsiders into bettering themselves. The VSD was designed as a “pump-priming” intervention in village affairs, necessary “since spontaneous local development is rare in developing countries and external stimulus plays a major part in the process.”125 Once the villagers got used to the idea that they could band together to solve economic and social problems with the help of their government, the process would repeat itself naturally.126
CHAPTER 7

Giving village governments the resources with which to respond to the demands of their constituents was equally as important a process as seeing that these demands were expressed in the first place. Colby claimed that “to be given an actual right to determine how money would be used in the local community was quite startling and quite effective with the local population.”\textsuperscript{127} As with the PSDF program, the aim was to advance the GVN’s “Community Spirit principle” and foster ties of mutual obligation between the people and the government. “The primary purpose of self help is to involve the rural Vietnamese population and the Government of Vietnam in a joint effort which will create an associative identity of the people with the government,” explained one CORDS document. Development projects were merely the “medium” through which this occurred.\textsuperscript{128} According to another document written by U.S. planners in Saigon, the program aimed at nothing less than “creating and developing in the rural population . . . a new set of attitudes, awareness, and responses that eventually will lead to a class that is democratically and politically active.” This would be in contrast to how the authors of this document viewed the workings of a “traditional” village, in which the interests of individuals and groups were “not effectively articulated” because of the “pressure of custom and conformity.”\textsuperscript{129} While such “traditional” villages were controlled by local notables who did not take account of the aspirations of most villagers, the “village concept” called for a different type of leadership. “Projects provided a means for local officials to be made visible, as GVN representatives, to the general populace,” said a CORDS retrospective on the program. “People could literally see their government at work where previously, in many cases, there had been a void.”\textsuperscript{130}

Such a program was highly ambitious and, at least in theory, had the potential to undermine the authority of traditional rural power brokers. The GVN’s centralized bureaucracy had tightly controlled development spending prior to the VSD. If a province wanted to construct even a single new village school-room, it needed Saigon’s approval, and there was little to no chance for even village or hamlet chiefs to have any input into development spending. The idea that mere villagers might know what was best for themselves was an alien one to most province chiefs. Even where province and district chiefs could be convinced by this process that the villagers had legitimate desires that government had to meet, they did not appreciate losing control over the opportunities for graft and kickbacks that accompanied the management of development funds. When coupled with the fact that the formation of pressure groups and the process by which projects were decided upon were usually completely opaque to American advisers who neither spoke Vietnamese nor understood the intricacies of village life, the results of the VSD were much less revolutionary than had been intended.
The program’s negligible economic impact was not of primary concern to central CORDS officials, who stressed time and again that the purpose of the program was political. Yet while the economic impact was easy to quantify, measuring the impact of VSD on nation building was much more difficult, as CORDS officials acknowledged. Given the goals of the program, the two key variables for measuring its success were the extent to which the VSD encouraged genuine responsiveness to local needs by village governments and the extent to which it encouraged local people to identify with the GVN and see it as the protector of their interests. These two factors of effectiveness and legitimacy were central to the idea of nation building. The VSD was in fact, as one CORDS document said, “the primary instrument of decentralization of government authority to the village level.” Evidence on whether the program met these goals was necessarily partial and anecdotal, especially given the difficulty that advisers had comprehending the inner workings of village life and the GVN.

Yet CORDS assessments continually found that although the VSD was successful in generating development projects, the political goals of the program were rarely met. Rather than causing whole new classes of villagers to emerge and line up behind a GVN that could finally promote their interests, the program was instead adapted to existing modes of village governance. As they had with other CORDS programs, lower levels of the GVN warped the program and implemented it their own way, often with outcomes very different from those that CORDS had intended. As advisers lacked a detailed understanding of village political dynamics, they tended to focus instead on the quantitative goal of establishing as many projects as possible without being able to understand or influence the underlying political dynamics. These political dynamics therefore remained largely unchanged.

One of the most glaring flaws in the VSD was that it required village officials themselves to educate the people in their village about the program and to oversee its implementation. Given that a large part of the intent of the program was to encourage villagers to challenge their own government in perhaps uncomfortable ways—and then to vote it out of office if their demands were not met—this seemed unlikely to be achieved if the entire process was under the control of that same government. Central to the VSD was the idea that citizens would form together into project groups to lobby the village government to spend development funds in a certain way. The groups, a document for CORDS advisers said, “could be defined simply as that group of individuals who having the same occupations, interests or problems are united together to lobby for and carry out a desired project.” Yet the reality was far different. U.S. evaluators found that the process of citizens forming into groups was rarely spontaneous and was instead usually overseen by village and hamlet officials, who would come up with
projects and then corral citizens into groups who ostensibly supported them for the purposes of acquiring funds.

A team of U.S. and Vietnamese evaluators who visited four provinces to assess the VSD in mid-1970 found that the “popular groups” were in fact “largely paper exercises” and “neither active nor spontaneous.” Projects were “often selected by village and hamlet or other officials rather than by the people.” Surveys of villagers elsewhere in 1969 and 1970 backed up these findings. When the 1969 program was coming to its end in December of that year, a survey found that a third of respondents still did not believe or know that VSD funds had been made available to their hamlet. Surveys in the last three months of the 1969 program in III and IV Corps found that on average only 19.5 percent of respondents felt they had “enough opportunity” to participate in decisions about the spending of VSD funds. Only just over 14 percent felt it was “the people of the hamlet” who decided what projects would go ahead, as opposed to village, hamlet, or district authorities. In September 1970, another survey across the whole country found that only 29.6 percent of respondents who were in a project group reported that the group had been created spontaneously. That many villagers were excluded from these meetings and not allowed to participate in groups can be seen by the reasons given for nonparticipation in the same survey. Even though the VSD allowed contributions of labor in lieu of cash from villagers in an express attempt to extend the program to the poorest, 20.8 percent reported that they were too “poor” to join. An additional 23.8 percent said membership was “limited to small groups of people.” Only 4 percent of respondents felt that it was the people themselves who were supposed to decide which projects their groups would request approval for.

The VSD was a subject of particular interest for the surveyors who produced pacification research reports, and dozens of assessments were made of it in the early 1970s. Few of them found the program operating as intended. One GVN survey found that “proper regard is not being given to the ideas of the villagers in the selection of projects,” with local authorities instead mandating what projects would be carried out. A survey in Quang Ngai found that only 20 percent of respondents were aware of the program, and that local officials simply decided how to spend the extra money themselves without organizing popular groups or involving villagers in “any decision making processes related to the projects.” The surveyor suggested that the provincial government intervene to explain the program to the villagers—but given the involvement of provincial officials in profiting from corruption associated with the program, this was unlikely to happen.

None of this suggests a program that was successful in either organizing the population into effective decision-making groups as the NLF did, or at creating pressure on local governments to respond to the desires of their citizens.
Rather than making village government responsive to the people, the program was warped to fit into the traditional rural GVN mold of making the people responsive to the government. While many villagers undoubtedly benefited from the economic aspects of the program, GVN officials continued to use it primarily to further their own ends and not to further nation building. This included novel methods of corruption. In Quang Tri Province, 9.47 percent of the money sent from Saigon for the 1969 program somehow disappeared en route to the province treasury. District chiefs often lurked in the background, pressuring village chiefs to select certain projects and then employ certain contractors so they could earn kickbacks or profit from padded contracts. The fact that most villagers learned about the program from the same local officials who benefited from manipulating it for their own profit made this possible, as the GVN minister responsible for the program noted in late 1970. Although the exact scale of corruption in the VSD is impossible to determine, its existence meant that projects were not always benefiting their ostensible recipients. For if villagers were corralled into project groups by officials and then forced to contribute cash and labor to complete them, the program in fact became a means of extracting resources from villagers in the name of “self-development.” Some American advisers were aware of this problem, such as a PSA from Khanh Hoa who reported in 1971 that “many hamlet people are forced to involve themselves against their will; they do not like or understand that.” It had been official policy since the start of the program that the groups be truly voluntary, but the practice of forced involvement continued until its end.

The ability of CORDS advisers to remedy these problems was limited. Many viewed corruption as a natural part of South Vietnamese society, so long as it was kept below a certain level. The funds that went missing from Quang Tri, for instance, were eerily just short of the 10 percent threshold commonly cited by advisers as an unacceptable level of corruption. Yet corruption in the case of the VSD was about more than the skimming off funds—it cut right to the core of why it remained in the interests of GVN officials to maintain their control over the VSD program rather than encouraging the emergence of a genuinely democratic system of deciding how the funds were spent.

In fact, it cut to the core of why lower echelons of the GVN had an interest in sabotaging the entire village system. Those advisers who did attempt to involve themselves in the formation of project groups faced chastisement for going against the spirit of the program, which aimed merely at creating the “proper environment” for project groups and responsive village governments to flourish. Here, as in so many cases, CORDS officials ran up against the problem of leverage—they ultimately could not achieve their aims if they sharply diverged from those of their GVN counterparts. Advisers were told never to work
around the existing government structure, because this could only weaken and not strengthen it. With the program's ability to promote the reform of the GVN so limited, it is little wonder that even villagers who benefited from it saw it primarily as an economic giveaway rather than understanding and appreciating the VSD's political intent.  

Although it was the flagship development program from 1969 until its termination in 1972, the VSD was not the only one. From 1970 onward, several other programs were also launched in an attempt to bring socioeconomic reform to the villages. The first was the Land to the Tiller (LTTT) initiative, which was signed into law by President Thieu in March 1970 after years of wrangling between South Vietnamese and USAID officials. The post-Tet pacification drive had already been accompanied by some reforms in land policy in areas newly (re)occupied by the GVN. In late 1968 and early 1969, the GVN had announced that peasants living in such areas would not have their land confiscated and returned to its original owner, as had happened in the past. The government also froze rents, first in newly pacified areas and then across the whole country. In many cases, this meant that the Saigon regime was acknowledging that NLF land distribution was a fait accompli. Nevertheless, such a policy was hard to enforce at the local level where the landlords actually lived. It also placed the GVN in the position of recognizing the legitimacy of NLF redistribution without having any positive program of its own to offer.  

The entry into force of LTTT was designed to change this. The law mandated that ownership of land had to pass from landlords to those who farmed it. Families in the Mekong Delta would receive plots up to a maximum of three hectares (7.4 acres), and those in the Central Lowlands one hectare. Landlords, who could keep only fifteen hectares for direct cultivation, were to be compensated by the government in a mixture of cash and bonds for the land they lost as a result of the law. The internal GVN politics that led to the passage of the GVN law are murky, but it is clear that Thieu pushed it through the legislature against significant opposition from landlords and with the enthusiastic backing of many Americans. Shortly after the law was passed, the New York Times lauded LTTT as “probably the most ambitious and progressive non-Communist land reform of the twentieth century.”  

Although LTTT was not an integral part of CORDS’s village system, its fate intersected with it. As with so many other GVN initiatives, implementation at the local level became the key sticking point. This was particularly the case in northern parts of the country and the Central Lowlands, where it was common for village officials to also be landlords themselves and hence to resist implementing the program. Officials and tenants feared that if they initiated a claim under the law, they would face the wrath of powerful local landlords. This was a particularly
acute problem given that both the compensation of landlords and the distribution of land titles became the subject of massive delays, increasing the time in which “irate landlords, including a few gun-toting Military officers” might take out their frustration on their tenants. Peasants in northern areas of the country were said by American observers to have little faith that the GVN could protect them against such retaliation.\footnote{148}

In the Mekong Delta, where only 10 percent of village officials were estimated to also be landlords, the program proceeded more effectively.\footnote{149} This was important, because most of the land eligible for redistribution lay in this region. By the end of 1971, land titles had been legally awarded to 375,250 individuals nationwide, for a total of 1.14 million acres of land, with 73 percent of these titles actually having been distributed by the GVN bureaucracy.\footnote{150} The lack of a reliable cadastral survey makes it hard to estimate the percentage of tenant farmers affected, but a 1970 estimate placed the number of tenant families in South Vietnam at six hundred thousand and the area of land they worked at 3.2 million acres.\footnote{151} Even allowing for an overstatement in the official figures compared to the land reform actually achieved in practice, the impact of LTTT on reducing tenancy was significant. By July 1974, the U.S. Embassy in South Vietnam claimed that tenancy in the country had been “virtually eliminated,” although by this point U.S. officials were not present in sufficient numbers to verify that such claims corresponded to the reality on the ground.\footnote{152} Nevertheless, surveys of villagers in areas of the Mekong Delta that had benefited from LTTT in the early 1970s reported widespread awareness of the program and appreciation of its benefits.\footnote{153} The implementation of the program in the delta was particularly impressive because it was administered at the local level by village officials, whose autonomy and effectiveness had been so limited in the other areas discussed in this chapter.

The LTTT law was the most impressive rural reform that the GVN carried out, both in its impact on the ground and the fact it showed the Saigon regime’s rural apparatus to be capable of driving through major social change. But it was also too little, too late. The law responded to a social reality in the delta that the NLF had largely created, first through its own land reform and second by forcing landlords to flee the insecurity of the countryside to the cities. Once there, many had become cut off from their land and involved in more profitable ventures, meaning they lacked the ability or interest to contest the law’s implementation. This dilution of the power of the landlords and NLF achievement of land reform, which it would have been politically disastrous for the GVN to reverse, explains why LTTT was politically possible at this time rather than earlier in the war. Its implementation was also reliant on the decision of the Communist movement to shift to preparing for the major offensives of 1972 and subsequently 1975 at the
expense of contesting territorial control in the delta. Perhaps if it had come earlier, LT TT would have done more to prepare the Saigon regime to meet this challenge, which depended on the ability to mobilize fiscal and manpower resources as the Americans withdrew. But the frustrated progress of other aspects of the village system demonstrated that LT TT did not do enough in these final years to change the apathetic or hostile attitude of a sufficient portion of South Vietnamese villagers toward their government. It was a reform that had been wrung out of the government by the NLF, rather than representing a fundamental change in the dynamics of GVN rule. As one American skeptic put it in 1972, “Land reform is nice icing, but it will not help if the cake is rotten.”

The aptness of this comment becomes apparent if we consider the final major plank of rural government reform in the latter years of the war: an attempt to improve village fiscal autonomy known as the Local Revenue Improvement Program (LRIP). The LRIP focused on mobilizing resources via taxation at the village level. Although villages had tax-raising powers under the 1967 constitution, before 1969 these powers were sharply circumscribed. In late 1967, revenues from agricultural land taxes had been assigned to the village budget, potentially giving villages the opportunity to tax up to one-half of South Vietnam’s private national income. With the spread of territorial security during and after the APC, a stable environment was created to finally collect it. Recognizing this, Decree 45 provided for a village tax commissioner charged with increasing revenue. As well as improving security, another factor driving change was that the South Vietnamese national budget felt the pressure of Vietnamization strongly. As a USAID paper stated, Vietnamization “carries the clear indication that government administration, at both central and local levels, must prepare to shift for itself without extensive external assistance.”

With U.S. aid set to decline in the future, Saigon finally began to look seriously at how to finance its own expenditures. This was vital, given that other aspects of the GVN’s strategy of rural reform such as VSD and the LT TT cost rather than generated revenue. In particular, LT TT had undercut the fiscal viability and autonomy of villages by mandating the transfer of communal lands that had previously allowed villages to generate rent. In response, the LRIP merged the goals of encouraging overall GVN fiscal sustainability and maintaining local autonomy. Colby saw measures to increase village tax collections as both a way of tapping the resources of the rural population to support the GVN and a way of strengthening the “village system” of autonomous village governments. As with other aspects of the village system, this extra grant of government authority also came with the expectation that it would encourage rural South Vietnamese to share the burden of defeating the insurgency. “At this time of national crisis,” a paper presented to the GVN by CORDS stated, “when the need for sacrifice
is paramount, local government is failing to obtain an adequate share of local wealth for the common effort.”157 The central GVN had paid the salaries of village officials since 1967, constituting a significant burden on its finances. If villages could improve local tax receipts to cover even just this item, it would remove a significant cost from the national budget. An improvement in local revenue collection would also allow local development activities to continue after the termination of U.S. funding for the VSD, putting local development on a sustainable and democratic local basis. Hence the LRIP served two purposes—advancing the cause of decentralization, and decreasing the GVN’s overall reliance on the United States as part of Vietnamization.

As in so many areas of the American nation-building effort in South Vietnam, the LRIP achieved some apparent progress but fell far short of expectations and failed to achieve its political objective. It was an effort that was particularly difficult for American advisers to involve themselves in, given both the political sensitivities involved in raising taxes and the arcane nature of tax administration. By the beginning of 1972, a CORDS progress report found that U.S. influence on the improvement of tax collection had been “almost negligible.”158 As USAID had warned, the LRIP demanded “knowledge of how to collect taxes from people who voluntarily won’t pay taxes.”159 Even had CORDS advisers possessed the technical knowledge, they did not have the necessary knowledge of village life and economics. Their numbers were anyhow dwindling. This meant that the impetus for the program would have to come from the GVN. Yet the GVN also lacked personnel trained in local tax administration and faced enormous political obstacles in increasing revenues from a population that was still highly resistant to paying GVN taxes. The LTTT had been accompanied by a substantial tax holiday because the GVN had feared that villagers would resist applying for land titles if they believed it would lead to an increased financial burden.160 This had been necessary to encourage peasants to apply for the legal rights to land they had in many cases received de facto rights to from the NLF without having to pay GVN taxes. Saigon’s lack of political will or ability to make higher fiscal demands on its population took on a tragicomic hue when the GVN refused to pay the relatively small salaries of technical cadres who were supposed to travel around villages helping them improve their tax administration. Rather than shoulder-ing the costs itself, the GVN felt the United States should pay for the cadres. As USAID noted, this was hardly an encouraging start to a program aimed at making the GVN self-sufficient.161 On the eve of the Paris Peace Accords, around 25 percent of villages were reported to be at least 95 percent self-sufficient in terms of operating expenses. This figure was also difficult to verify, since the few American advisers remaining still lacked access to budget data.162 Even more significantly, the fact that 75 percent of villages could not even cover their own
operating expenses meant that when the VSD terminated, these villages would have no funds for development projects. Of the total funds being expended in the localities in 1971, only a sixth was locally raised—and the half of the remainder made up by U.S. development support was about to be terminated. This placed the future of the village system in a perilous condition, as its cornerstone was the availability of local assets to respond to local needs. If village governments had to squeeze their populations even just to cover their own operating expenses, they seemed to face an uphill struggle in the broader battle to establish constructive links with the population. As the last CORDS advisers left the country, this contradiction remained unresolved.

All of this suggested that the GVN had failed to establish ties of mutual obligation with its own citizens at the village level, which would vastly complicate its attempts to continue to battle the Vietnamese Communist movement. This was the case whether Hanoi stuck to a strategy of conventional attacks or moved to reenergize its guerrilla campaign. Despite successes in a hugely belated land reform program, the GVN’s failure to move from what Vann and Colby considered a form of occupation to a paradigm of joint effort between the government and its citizens was symbolized by the failure of the LRIP. Lacking the legitimacy and administrative prowess to raise taxes to a level that would allow even for the self-sufficiency of village governments, much less to pay for the huge national military and other institutions necessary to combat the Communist movement, Saigon instead allowed resources to continue to be embezzled and coerced from the rural population as part of a pervasive and abusive system of corruption. The corps commander system had ultimately not been broken, and it seemed that an even greater level of exploitation would be needed as U.S. aid declined further after the Paris Peace Accords. Faced with all this evidence of the GVN’s failure to put down durable and sustainable roots despite enjoying years of relative calm in the villages, it is hard to disagree with the claim by Douglas Blaufarb, a former CIA official in South Vietnam, that GVN control might best be likened to Mark Twain’s description of the River Platte: “an inch deep and a mile wide.”