

Communist Propaganda in South Vietnam

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"Propaganda," Dr. Joseph Goebbels once wrote, "has nothing to do with truth. . . . What matters is that it achieves its purposes." And its primary purpose, according to this all-time master of the art, is to support political aims by unleashing "volcanic passions, outbreaks of rage, to set masses of people on the march, to organize hatred and despair with ice-cold calculation."

Modern political democracies tend to discount propaganda. The Communists, on the other hand, have adopted—and refined—principles laid down by the Nazis. These principles are in full use in Vietnam today. Indeed, in that strife-torn country the Communists equate the propaganda war with political and military operations.

Americans both in and out of Vietnam are inclined to find Communist propaganda amusing. Being villified is part of the game, and some Communist claims are astonishing to say the least. No village, for example, could have survived the 38,000 separate artillery bombardments and "scores of B-52 strikes" claimed in one message. At the same time, President Ho Chi Minh's announcement at the end of 1968 that "during the past year we killed, wounded or captured 630,000 U.S. aggressors and their satellites" was hilariously absurd.

Close examination of the voluminous messages that regularly flow out of Radio Hanoi and clandestine stations in the

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south, however, reveal an ominous pattern of themes, backed by the latest and best propaganda techniques. Thus, informed Americans should find little amusement in the fact that the real target audience are the uncommitted South Vietnamese who are being taught to "hate" enough to "arise" and "avenge your compatriots." Once this end is understood, the basic themes stand out with impressive clarity: the Americans are evil aggressors who willingly trample underfoot the sacred rights of the Vietnamese people; the present Thieu-Ky regime and its army are satellites of the Americans; the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam (commonly called the NLF) is the champion of the "just cause;" and the Peoples Liberation Armed Forces (PLAF) never lose. Put together, reinforced by real and fabricated incidents, reiterated again and again, these themes in reality, are heavy rounds fired with cunning and precision in a deadly serious propaganda war.

For obvious reasons, the utter wickedness of American policy in general and the U. S. troops in particular is the foundation theme. As Dr. Goebbels pointed out, it is easier to unite people against something, such as injustice, arrogance, exploitation, etc., than it is to unite them for a particular form of government or code of ethics. And in Vietnam, the Communists have an almost perfect target. Emphasizing that the Americans have a "foreign" and "bigoted" culture, they lay on the charges of imperialism and aggression. That is why the French and Japanese came, they remind the citizenry. What is different about the Americans?

The United States is the aggressor in Vietnam, [a typical message reads]. It has brought more than 500,000 troops from the other side of the Pacific to invade Vietnam. The U.S. aggression tramples underfoot the Vietnamese People's fundamental national rights This aggression encroaches on every Vietnamese family. As a result of the U.S. aggression and treason of the puppet administration, every family in Vietnam has had someone killed or wounded, its house and property destroyed. (Hanoi Radio, 8 March 1969)

Continued emphasis on this theme sets the stage for a supporting one, *i.e.*, the utter wickedness of American troops. Unfortunately, there are more than enough incidents of violence between American soldiers and Vietnamese nationals to feed the propaganda grist mills and few known incidents occur that are not exploited. Even routine accidents can be

turned into displays of vicious unconcern for the Vietnamese people. The following story grew out of a clearing operation in which a Vietnamese was accidentally run over by a tractor and killed. "I'd rather die than let the Yanks and puppets raze our village," the victim is quoted as saying:

He faced the machines, started at the bandits and ordered: "Stop, you have no right to sack our land." The wicked American soldiers, turning a deaf ear to him, drove forward. But he promptly lay down to bar them. A bulldozer buried him with earth. The villagers ran up. As instilled with new strength, he pushed away the earth, stood up, stretched out his arms and shouted: "I would rather die than let you . . ." No sooner had he finished his words than he was cut in two by a bulldozer which ran over him. His arms, however, remained stretched out, and his angry eyes, wide open, as though he still was assaulting the enemy. (Liberation Newspaper, 6 March 1969)

Because there are enough true incidents to give the theme some credibility, the outright fabrications, which naturally appear with names, dates, and plenty of gore, are often just as efficacious as genuine incidents. It could be a story of American GIs feeding candy to two young boys who soon "fell sick and blood began oozing from their mouths and noses. They died very soon." (Clandestine Radio, 3 Feb. 1969) Or it could be an orgy of madness.

At 1600 hours on 15 January, more than 20 boats full of U.S. Air Cavalrymen shelled and machine gunned the Rach Goc House at Hamlet No. 2, My Thanh Dong Village, Duc Hue District, Long An Province, killing a woman. Then, the bloodthirsty U. S. soldiers landed and mopped up the area. They broke into the house of seventy year old Nguyen Van Soi, dragged his daughter Nguyen Thi Hein out of an anti-shelling underground shelter in the house, and attempted to rape her. When Nguyen Van Soi went to the rescue of his daughter he was stabbed by the U. S. soldiers with their bayonets. Then they took turns in raping the girl to death. After she was dead, they tore her corpse to pieces.

After having killed Nguyen Van Soi and his daughter, the U. S. soldiers saw a number of compatriots taking refuge in the shelter. Immediately, they plugged the shelter up and tossed hand grenades, tear gas grenades, and fire grenades into the shelter, killing all the compatriots in it. When two children, who survived the massacre, tried to climb up, they were caught by the U. S. soldiers who wrang their necks and tore their corpses. A sixty year old woman named Nhuyen

Thi Sang was shot dead, her arms still holding her granddaughter. Two pregnant women, twenty-five year old Nguyen Thi Ut and thirty-five year old Nguyen Thi Duong were burned to death. Their fetuses were ejected from their bodies. Their five children were also killed in the fire. In all, 21 persons were killed by the U. S. Air Cavalry men in the shelter. They were from four families. They included 12 children from five to seven years old, a seventy year old man, and a sixty year old woman. The remainder were all women, including two who were pregnant. (Clandestine Radio, 7 February 1969)

In broadcasts such as this, the "utter wickedness" of the American troops is paraded again and again. The message is clear. U. S. troops are all cruel, vicious imperialists who couldn't care less for the Vietnamese people. They "despise puppet officers and men. . . . They kidnap South Vietnamese women, rape army men's wives and daughters, [and] rob the people in broad daylight . . . (Tran Buu Kiem statement, Paris, 7 Feb. 1969)

It is difficult to overestimate the importance of the anti-American theme, for on it rests the other "basic truths." For example, it is absolutely vital to the Communists that the existing Saigon government be tied to U. S. "imperialism." Only in this way can they parade as true friends and liberators of those whom they like to call their "compatriots."

This "basic truth" is reiterated with monotonous regularity. Indeed, the Saigon government is never mentioned without appropriate adjectives such as "lackey," "puppet," or "satellite." "The Thieu-Ky-Huong clique is but a gang of traitors," a typical message reads. "They serve as an instrument for the U. S. aggression and live on it. This accounts for their opposition to an end of the U. S. war of aggression and their opposition to independence, democracy, peace, neutrality, and eventual reunification of the country. They do not represent the South Vietnamese people. They are only pawns and henchmen of the U. S. imperialists. . . . Their voice has no value at all." (Liberation Radio, 5 Feb. 1969) Another time, the trio were called "country-selling traitors who have sold their souls for U. S. dollars. . . . The clique . . . is totally illegal, representing nobody, and is despised and called to be overthrown by the entire southern peoples." (Liberation Radio, 5 April 1969)

If the NLF succeeds in getting the people to accept the view that the U. S. is an imperialistic aggressor with the Saigon government as its satellite, the next "basic truth" comes easy. Since the existing government merits overthrow, the NLF is obviously justified in attempting to destroy it. In "struggling resolutely to overthrow and to regain their mastery right," Hanoi Radio announced, the insurgents are "champions of an oppressed people" and "faithful defenders of its sacred rights."

Understandably, the "basic truth" and what one might call its supporting "sub-truths" are handled much more subtly than the crass, harsh outpouring of U. S. war crimes.

It is in this area that North Vietnam, while not admitting participation in the war, offers support to the South. A PLAF official, visiting the North, for example, publicly stressed the "daily and hourly concern of our 17 million northern blood-sealed compatriots who are . . . resolved to do everything to help the revolution in the south grow quickly and defeat the enemy." The announced objectives of this message, which was also sent abroad in English via International Service, was "peaceful reunification of the fatherland," something mentioned only rarely in messages directed solely to South Vietnam, where "reunification" is not a popular word.

In this same subtle way, the Communist party is sometimes mentioned. It is always done without reference to Communism, however, since the "Party" has to be the supporter of the revolution and not the other way around. One typical message mentions how "our combatants have shown their devotion and their defiance" because "they have been cared for and educated by the Party." This same message declares that "their absolute loyalty to the Party and the Revolution has helped . . . develop . . . resourcefulness and liveliness in fighting and vanquishing the enemy." (Hanoi Radio, 5 March 1969)

It is as liberators and protectors of the oppressed that the insurgents defend their ruthlessness toward those who would thwart the "rush to victory." In their own messages, the PLAF never kill innocent people whereas the American and puppet troops never kill anyone else. The Communists always destroy "cruel enemy agents" or simply "the enemy." A typical message described an American assault as follows: "Low-flying helicopters dropped tear bombs into air-raid shelters

and machine-gunned those who ran out. In all, more than 100 persons, mostly women and children, were killed and losses in property caused to the local population was put at 100 million piasters." (Liberation Radio, 19 Jan. 1969) On the other hand, a VC assault "slammed big gun fire into enemy positions into Phy My District town, killing and wounding many enemy."

The last "basic truth" is that the PLAF never loses. The "enemy" is cruel and stubborn but since the "stupendous" victories of this year will be followed by "even more stupendous" victories next year, the end is inevitable. "At the gunpoint of the Southern Guerrillas," one message announced, "enemy helicopters fall like overripe fruits." (Hanoi Domestic Service, 5 March 1969) At the same time, "The more defeats they sustain, the more cruel and mad the U. S. imperialists become. Therefore, the closer we move to victory, the harder and more violent our struggle becomes." (Speech of General Giap carried by Hanoi Domestic Radio Service, 4 May 1969) In another message, the PLAF claimed that "the U. S. imperialists are endeavoring to hide their defeats with all sorts of psychological tricks. They are endeavoring to disseminate invented news, shamelessly fabricate imaginary military and political defeats for us in both the North and South Vietnam." Yet this *same* message includes the statement: "Our troops and people have advanced from victory to victory, victories which have become increasingly and unprecedentedly great and comprehensive. . . ." (Liberation Radio, 27 Jan. 1969)

This theme serves to convince the vacillators and those who are uncommitted that the PLAF is going to win and that they would be wise to get on the winning side. Thus, this type of propaganda is usually mixed with glowing statements of how the PLAF is "extremely severe and stiff toward the U. S. imperialists, puppet administration and obdurate, diehard agents serving the lackeys of the country-grabbers," whereas those "wishing to . . . come . . . to the Just Cause can find a meaningful and glorious way of life under the Front's flag." (Hanoi, Hoc Tap newspaper, Dec. 1969) It is in support of this theme that village chiefs, their families, and others who actively opt for the Saigon Government are often tortured, disemboweled, or in more than one instance, buried up to the neck in anthills. Terror, as practiced by the PLAF, is a powerful weapon.

The PLAF "never lose" propaganda is best illustrated by a remarkable broadcast in March 1969 which described how "on a day long battle last winter, seven fighters of the Peoples Liberation Armed Forces in Da Nang City—among them two young women—killed over eighty U. S. and Puppet troops and wounded many others, smashing the encirclement by an enemy force eighty times superior in number."

Giving names, dates, and places, the broadcast described how the seven "dumped a fierce fire" on a Civil Guard Company, a Field Police Company, a U. S. Military Police Platoon and "dozens of cruel Popular Defense agents." All day the fight raged. (Details include how one girl decided to cut her hair, and how some of the fighters broke into a house, shooting a "cruel enemy agent" in his bed.) "After seven hours of continuous fighting," the broadcast concluded, "they got tired but they kept assaulting the enemy with the mettle of victories, holding fast about 500 U. S. and puppet troops who tightly encircled them just on a small tract of land."

By 3 p.m. the enemy had lost 80 killed and many wounded. Apparently they were badly hurt and began loosening their encircling belt and resorted to a violent artillery fire. By nightfall, as the enemy *huddled together for fear of sudden attack* [italics mine] the Liberation fighters, with the help of the population, secretly returned to their unit with all their weapons and those they had captured from the enemy. (Liberation Radio, 9 March 1969)

Although the main target audience in South Vietnam are the uncommitted South Vietnamese, the Americans, in large part, must live with the legacy. After all, they are the ones to be "hated," "killed," and "driven from the country." Yet this writer has heard otherwise well-informed Americans insist that Communist propaganda is "worthless" and that a few billion pamphlets extolling the political idealism of American GIs and the wonders of nation-building under the Thieu regime are much more effective. This view is dangerous nonsense, for it fails to recognize either the purpose of the propaganda or the target audience. And this failure not only allows Communist propaganda to more or less progress unchecked, it often supports basic Communist themes. The remarkable tendency of some Americans to play up American atrocities while disregarding the mass terrorism of the Viet Cong is

used to support the "cruel GI" theme. Defeatist statements of certain U. S. political leaders, rightly or wrongly, find their way into propaganda messages as positive proof that the PLAF will win in the end.

Although U. S. involvement in Vietnam is declining, and Communist emphasis on propaganda in that area will soon be shifting, there are some vital lessons to be learned from their propaganda war in South Vietnam. For one thing, it strongly suggests that American soldiers cannot set foot in alien and underdeveloped countries without becoming targets for charges of aggression and imperialism. And the charges will probably stick. Backward peoples often do not understand political idealism, and no profound statement by the U. S. Government is likely to ring as true in their ears as the bald assertion that the rich foreigners are in their country out of blatant self-interest. At the same time, and partly for the same reasons, U. S. soldiers *must be made aware of the full implications of their actions*. Misfortunes ranging from thoughtlessness to cruelty are common enough in any war; in counterinsurgency as in all wars, it is vital that this sort of thing not occur. Indeed, wisdom and forbearance is needed to the point where insurgents cannot provoke incidents. (In Saigon, for example, individual snipers were used for a time to pick off soldiers. U. S. airpower took care of the snipers, but the VC used the shattered houses as proof of American disregard for Vietnamese property.)

Another powerful lesson stems from the fact that the Communists, by choice, used propaganda to elevate the struggle into a full-blown crusade. Under the premises that "the end justifies the means" and it is necessary to teach hate so that the people will *want* to kill, crusades have consistently escalated themselves into the bloodiest and most vicious conflicts in history. (Despite the claims, violence is never one-sided in such wars and it is the side that hates the most that promotes the most violence.) Moreover, hate, once generated, cannot be turned off and on at will. It has a direct legacy at the conference table where its offspring—passions, vows, promises and revenge—make their voices heard. Peace is always difficult, but peace born of this kind of war is the most difficult of all. That is what General Moshe Dayan meant when, after the Arab-Israeli war of 1967, he said, "Now that the war is over, the trouble begins."