

Views on South Vietnam's Armies

Editor's Note: This is the third in a series of articles on the armies of Vietnam by Tran Van Dinh, Vietnamese journalist who is a regular columnist for the Collegiate Press Service. The first two articles appeared in EFS numbers two and four.

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WASHINGTON (CPS) — The Army of the Republic of South Vietnam (ARVN), 675,000 strong, embodied in itself several basic weaknesses at its birth:

1. During the First Indo-Chinese War (1946-1954), belatedly, the French created through Decree No. 59QP of June 29, 1953, the "Vietnamese National Army" as an auxiliary force to the French expeditionary corps. The Vietnamese National Army, which at the time of Dien Bien Phu comprised 150,000 regulars and 50,000 "suppletives," was commanded by General Nguyen Van Hinh, a French citizen and a officer of the French Air Force (he is now Deputy Chief of Staff of the French Air Force in Paris).

Despite its name, it was not a national army. When President Ngo Dinh Diem came into power in 1954, he found himself with an army which was against him. Through political maneuvers, through pressures from the U.S. against France in his favor,

thanks to his early reputation as an honest man, President Diem succeeded in getting rid of General Nguyen Van Hinh. He was then faced with the rebellion of various religious sects (Cao Dai, Hoa Hao) and an armed band of gangsters-adventurers-police-Xuyen.

In great haste and for his own survival, President Ngo Dinh Diem forged an army among the officers and soldiers of the former Nguyen Van Hinh's army. He defeated the main forces of the Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, Binh Xuyen. These victories proved to be costly in the later years.

President Diem believed that he could deal with the Liberation Army of the Front for the National Liberation for the South, the Vietcong, the same way he did with the sects and the gangsters. In 1957, by decree No. 378QP of October 1957, President Diem reorganized the ARVN. Officially the decree No. 59QP of June 29, 1953 remained valid in the organic structure of the ARVN.

In other words, in an independent Vietnam, facing a revolutionary situation, President Diem built an army on the pattern of the French colonial (not metropolitan) army. The organization was heavy with bureaucracy and suffocated by social inequalities and social injustices.

2. From 1956, the ARVN was built with U.S. aid based on the concept that the ARVN will have to deal with a Korean-style open invasion across the 17th parallel. It was organized in field divisions (8,500 men each) and light divisions (5,000 men each) grouped in Army Corps and in

Tactical Zones. The invasion did not come, but President Diem instead was faced with growing peasant insurgency and guerilla warfare. The ARVN was too heavy and too little motivated to deal with an elusive personal and nepotism power, the ARVN became gradually the instrument of his family power, incapable of dealing with national problems. The Army however was capable of revolting against President Diem who was killed with his brother in 1963 by the same generals whom he had used, bribed, liked and despised.

3. Against this background, the ARVN lacked the sense of national purpose and was left "politically uneducated." True, President Diem has used the Army to open several campaigns of "anti-communism" which degenerated into systematic and indiscriminate liquidation of all opposition and outright oppression of the peasantry. True, Mr. Ngo Dinh Nhu, the President's brother and political advisor, had organized in the ARVN, the "Quan Uy Can Lao" (The Military Committee of the Can Lao, the Personalist party which he created). But like the Can Lao itself, the Quan Uy Can Lao was no more than a police apparatus in disguise and a ladder for sycophants and corrupted elements to climb to power. Most of the members of the present military junta in Saigon were Can Lao members. The Coup d'Etat of November 1963 which overthrew President Ngo Dinh Diem did not change in any way the leadership of the ARVN. In a letter dated February 26, 1965

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addressed to the Chairman of the Military Junta, General Nguyen Chanh Thi, then commander of the First Army Corps, complained: "Our people are destitute, our soldiers bore enormous hardships. Yet among the civilian and the army leaders, there are people who continue to seek for personal interests in order to enrich themselves in the pattern of the Ngo family." General Nguyen Chanh Thi was an exception. He is honest. He revolted unsuccessfully against President Diem in November 1960, fled to Cambodia, returned in 1963 to be exiled since June 1966 to Washington, D.C., U.S.A.

4. The corruption among Vietnamese generals in Saigon is an open secret. The ARVN is (except a few individual cases) led by corrupted and unpatriotic senior officers, those who served in the defeated French army, those who participated in the direct oppression of the Diem's regime against the Vietnamese people. No wonder the ARVN cannot fulfill its national mission.

5. The result of bad leadership: In 1966, desertion totalled a record 116,858. Not all deserters went to the other side. The majority simply went home or changed professions or changed units. Their desertion is an act of rebellion against social injustices and favoritism in the Army, which continue to prevail.

6. The surprising thing is that the ARVN survived for so long so many basic weaknesses. The survival resides in the tremendous common sense prevalent among soldiers and junior officers the majority of them from peasant backgrounds. It resides also in the esprit de corps born out of common sufferings and frustrations.

For the ARVN to fulfill its role, the need is to make it national.