

McNamara-Taylor Mission —

WHY IT'S SO HARD TO BEAT THE COMMUNISTS IN VIETNAM



QUESTIONING a former guerrilla in Vietnam are Defense Secretary McNamara, right, and General Taylor, Chairman of Joint Chiefs, left foreground.

SAIGON, South Vietnam

Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara and Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, flew here in late September for a first-hand look at how Communists fight a guerrilla war—successfully if not victoriously.

The inspection came at a time when the massive U. S. buildup in South Vietnam should be paying off. American skills and equipment, expenditures running at 1.5 million dollars a day, and U. S. servicemen have been thrown against an enemy that numbers roughly 25,000 fighting men—just a fraction of the South Vietnamese forces.

Key: how Reds fight. Yet, nothing the two American officials saw here will, alone, explain why this overwhelming military force—backed by U. S. economic power—has not been able to crush the enemy. The answer to that can be found only in a careful study of the way the Communists fight.

A Red guerrilla may be poorly armed, ragged and hungry. He has no trucks, no planes, no tanks, no heavy artillery.

But a guerrilla force is not a mob, acting on impulse. It is highly disciplined. It operates within a framework of tactical and strategic principles that are just as carefully prepared as those of the most sophisticated armed force.

The Communist leaders see this as essentially a political war. They do not believe that victory will go to the side with the heaviest artillery, but to the side that eventually will have the support of the vast majority of the people. So, everything the Communists do is aimed at getting people “off the fence” and onto their side.

The heart and backbone of the Communist structure lies in vast areas that they have controlled for years—even when the French were here. Over a long period of time, then, the Communist Viet Cong has been building loyalty and support in these areas. Landlords were dispossessed. Government taxes were abolished—and replaced by Viet Cong levies. Literary classes were set up for political indoctrination. Youth, farmer and women's organizations were established by the Communists.

From their solidly held bases, the Communists wage a war that is designed not to win smashing victories, but to undermine the confidence and vitality of the Vietnamese Government and Army. The Reds fight a fluid war that may last for years. They do not make the mistake of saying the war will be won in three, five, or 10 years.

Nightly attacks on the Government's outposts and the "strategic hamlets" are rarely spectacular. Yet the attacks give the guerrillas weapons, show villagers that the Government is not always able to protect them—and give the guerrilla recruit combat training and make him feel he is part of a fighting force.

Guerrillas use terror flexibly. They are not always ruthless. But hamlet chiefs who have been effective in organizing resistance to the Communists will be executed if taken in a raid. So will informers, or families of defectors.

The bulk of the guerrillas are home-grown. Some are products of families whose fathers and older brothers fought against the French. Others come from various religious sects which had their private armies under the French. President Diem liquidated these armies, and lost the sects' support. Then there are teen-agers, conscripted from Viet Cong areas or kidnaped from Government-held villages.

Between 5 and 10 per cent of the so-called "hard core" guerrillas were trained in Communist North Vietnam. They are the military and political commanders. Most of these are Southern-born Vietnamese who were taken to the North by their pro-Communist families.

In North Vietnam these young men—and a few women—received intensive training. They learned how to develop intelligence and counterintelligence networks. The men were taught to rely primarily on individual leadership and

The Difficulties

small-unit action. The young men were taught to fight at times and places of their own choosing—and only when the odds favored them.

These young people—well trained, disciplined and destined for leadership—were sent back to the South. Their job was to take the “local guerrillas” already organized and convert them into an effective, full-time fighting force.

Later, when the struggle became more complex, a few Northerners were sent South to build up radio communications, co-ordinate area commands, teach tactics for use against American weapons, and train the guerrillas in the use of Communist-bloc weapons.

Many casualties, but—. This planning and organization has paid off for the Communists. Last year they lost an estimated 30,000 killed, wounded and captured. In the first six months of this year their losses were estimated at 14,000. Yet, they've had no manpower shortage. When the trained cadres were killed, replacements from the North were readily available.

Similar planning went into the Communist weapons system. At first, the guerrillas were armed with out-of-date, French-made rifles. Mines and grenades were homemade. Explosives were manufactured from nitrate fertilizers given by the U. S. to Vietnamese peasants.

Hit-run raids against Government outposts provided the Reds with U. S.-made weapons. Here and there, they picked up recoilless rifles, machine guns and mortars. Their net gain this year has averaged 50 weapons weekly.

Then radios, ammunition and weapons came in from North Vietnam. This year, for the first time, the Reds have not seemed short of ammunition.

No one who has ever been ambushed on a patrol will discount the Reds' technical skills. The guerrillas usually know in advance the size of the force to be ambushed. Blocking positions and fields of fire are set up. Blocks to the rear are designed to stall rescue parties. A withdrawal route is fixed.

The ambush is the mark of the guerrilla. But the real measure of his capability is how he adjusts to new weapons.

At first, panic—. When the U. S. first introduced armed helicopters and newer-type planes for bombing and strafing, the guerrillas panicked. Then they settled down to shooting back—with anything available.

Captured Communist documents show that the guerrillas now know the speed, rate of climb and turn of every type of helicopter used in Vietnam. They also know the evasive tactics used by American pilots. In turn, they have evolved their own tactics—such as let-



AMBUSH is used in guerrilla warfare to overcome disadvantages in arms and numbers. Here, Vietnamese carrying wounded platoon leader watch for snipers.

ting early waves of helicopters land safely, then opening fire on a later wave when the American guard is down.

Politics and common sense govern the Communists in economic warfare.

For example, 90 per cent of the charcoal used in Saigon comes from Viet Cong areas. So does much of the rice consumed here or exported. The Communists could reduce these supplies to a trickle. But they don't because the result would be a shortage of cash in the Viet Cong areas, and a blockade of Saigon at this stage might turn the people against the Communists.

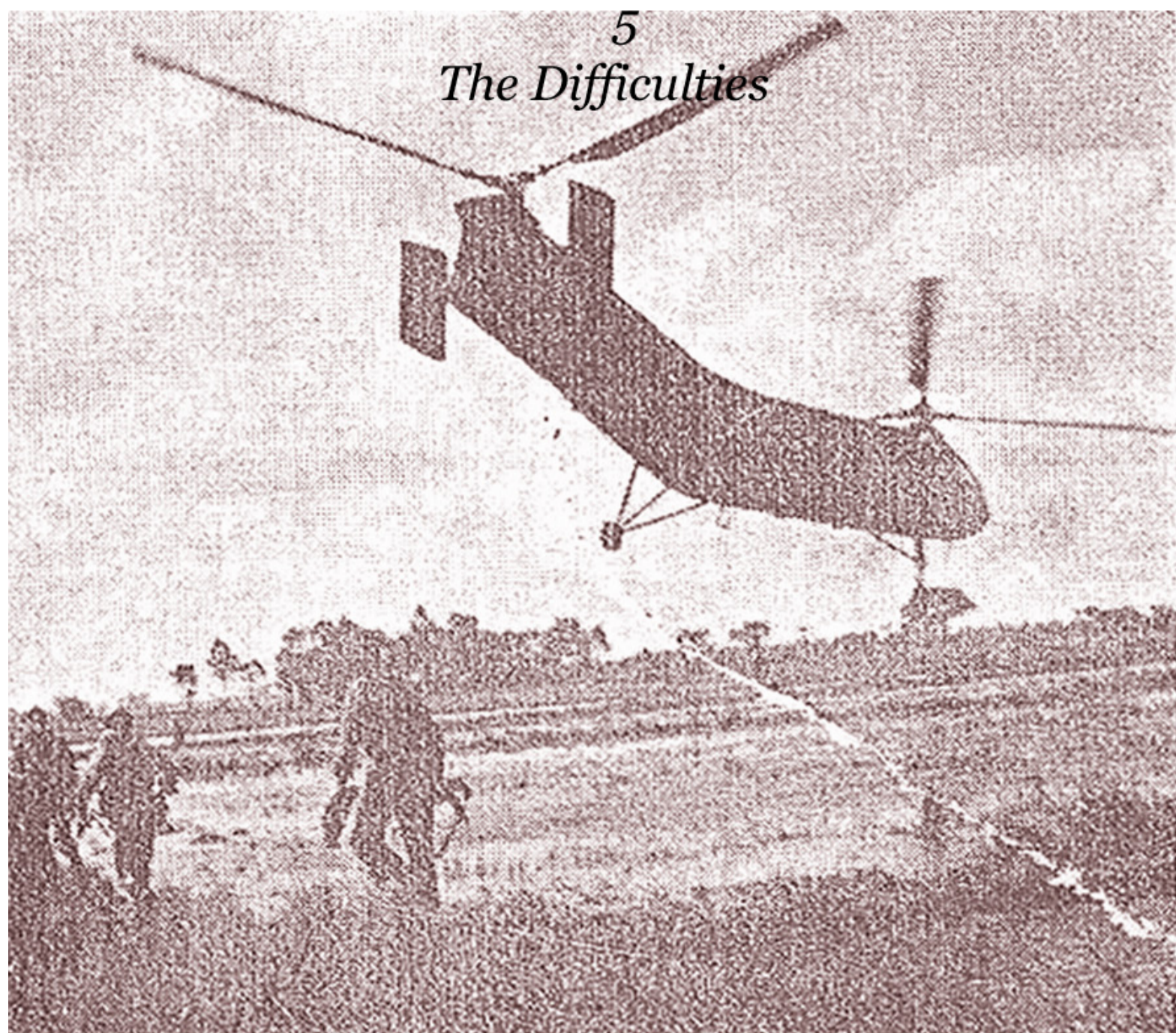
The Communists also permit gasoline to be trucked across the Mekong River Delta for use by the U. S. and Vietnamese forces. Instead of cutting off this flow, they levy taxes on the commercial trucking companies and use the money to buy supplies for the guerrillas.

The Reds' hold on their own people, tight as it is, is far from absolute. Since February 18, when the Diem Government launched an "open arms" program of amnesty for Red deserters, 10,000 defectors and 7,000 refugees have quit the Viet Cong side.

Some were trying to escape from artillery and air attacks. Others were tired of the hard life of a guerrilla. Many said they were bored by the constant political indoctrination.

But, on the whole, the "open arms" program seems to be peeling off only the outer layers of the Communist supporters. Defecting guerrillas usually are of a relatively low quality.

On the other hand, Red propaganda trying to win over Government forces has not been successful. Only a few village guards have defected to the Reds.



SKILL in adjusting his tactics is measure of guerrilla. Panicked at first by armed helicopters, Reds soon evolved successful methods of counterattack.

Basic premises. Taking the Vietnamese war as a whole, Communist leaders probably are not at all dissatisfied with the way things are going. They operate on these three basic premises:

- Guerrillas, by themselves, cannot destroy a modern army. But they can undermine its will to fight and, thus, separate it from its government.

- The guerrillas flourish only where there is discontent and ineffective government. They know they cannot win against a popular government. So anything such as the Buddhist crisis, student demonstrations or the difficulties between the U. S. and Vietnamese Governments is encouraged by the Reds through agitation and provocation to try to force the Vietnamese Government into repressive measures.

- Guerrillas can win if the enemy is not dedicated to victory and does not have the will to fight a difficult, unpleasant and relentless war.

Those who have been in the field here for years say these three Communist premises should be at the top of the list whenever American officials come out—as they have in the McNamara-Taylor mission—to take a close, hard look at the war that is being waged against the guerrillas in South Vietnam.