

379
N81
NO. 6654

ADVISING THE ARVN: LIEUTENANT GENERAL
SAMUEL T. WILLIAMS IN VIETNAM,
1955 - 1960

THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of the
University of North Texas in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

By

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Denton, Texas

August, 1990

Schneider, Frederick W., Advising the ARVN: Lieutenant General Samuel T. Williams in Vietnam, 1955 - 1960. Master of Arts (History), August, 1990, 85 pp., table, bibliography, 36 titles.

Beginning in 1954, the United States Army attempted to build a viable armed force in South Vietnam. Until the early 1960s, other areas commanded more American attention, yet this formative period was influential in later United States involvement in Vietnam. This thesis examines United States advisory efforts from 1955 to 1960 by analyzing the tenure of Lieutenant General Samuel T. Williams as Chief of the Military Assistance Advisory Group in South Vietnam. During Williams's tenure, the communist forces in the north began the guerrilla insurgency in earnest. Williams's failure to respond to this change has been justly criticized; yet his actions were reflective of the United States Army's attitude toward insurgencies in the late 1950s.

PREFACE

In the six years prior to 1960, the United States Army engaged in an attempt to build a viable armed force in South Vietnam. During this period prior to the beginning of the Second Indo-China War, other areas of the world gained more attention than did South Vietnam. Yet this formative period was highly influential in later United States involvement in the region.

The majority of writings on the Vietnam War speak of the period of 1955 through 1960 only briefly. This is not surprising as there were no great battles or events which took place during these five years. Yet a study of what did take place reveals the attitude and actions of the United States government and its military prior to 1963. This work seeks to explore this period by examining the five year tenure of the principal United States Army representative in South Vietnam, Brigadier General Samuel T. ("Hangin' Sam") Williams.

This work will examine Williams's command in Vietnam and address some of the generalizations which have previously been made concerning it. Was he successful in his attempt to train the South Vietnamese forces? Did Williams help to create an army which was properly trained

for the threat from the North? How did his relationship with other United States advisory groups affect this training? Should Williams's tenure in Vietnam be considered a success or a failure?

The primary sources used to examine this subject were Samuel T. Williams's papers, located at the Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace, in Stanford, California, and the two Vietnam volumes of the Foreign Relations of the United States series which cover the period. Oral history interviews of Williams and Elbridge Durbrow, the United States Ambassador in Saigon from 1957 to 1961, found at the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library in Austin, Texas, were also consulted.

Other major sources included the most comprehensive work on this period, Advice and Support: The Early Years of the United States Army in Vietnam 1941 - 1960, by Ronald H. Spector, as well as the lone biography of Williams, Hanging Sam: A Military Biography of General Samuel T. Williams - From Pancho Villa to Vietnam, (to be published after August, 1990), by Colonel Harold J. Meyer, who served under Williams in World War II.

Meyer's work addresses Williams's entire military career, concentrating on the years 1940-1952. The book views Williams in a favorable light, and is filled with positive descriptions of the general by those who knew him.

Although Meyers examines Williams's roles in World War II and Korea at length, the author's treatment of Williams's tenure in Vietnam is weak.

A final major source was The Army in Vietnam, by Andrew F. Krepinevich. This work provided a good description of the viewpoint of the United States Army on the training of the South Vietnamese forces.

Although all of these accounts address Williams's presence in Vietnam, none look at his overall tenure there in depth. It is the intent of this work to address this deficiency, and in doing so, to show that Williams's actions in Vietnam were a reflection of his training in the old army, as well as a reflection of the doctrines of the United States Army of the late 1950s.

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TABLE OF ABBREVIATIONS

ARVN - Army of the Republic of Vietnam
CIA - Central Intelligence Agency
CHMAAG - Chief, Military Assistance Advisory Group
CINCPAC - Commander in Chief, Pacific
GVN - Government of Vietnam
ICC - International Control Commission
JCS - Joint Chiefs of Staff
MAAG - Military Assistance Advisory Group
MACV - Military Assistance Command - Vietnam
NCO - Non-commissioned Officer
NSC - National Security Council
ROK - Republic of Korea
RVNAF - Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces
SEATO - South East Asian Treaty Organization
TERM - Temporary Equipment Recovery Mission
TO&E - Table of Organization and Equipment
TRIM - Training Relations and Instruction Mission
USOM - United States Operations Mission

CHAPTER ONE

ADVANCING IN THE OLD ARMY

The involvement of the United States military in the Vietnam conflict has been the object of intense scrutiny and examination for many years. The majority of study in this area has been concerned with the years of maximum United States involvement in Southeast Asia, 1964 through 1973. Although this period reflects the peak of the American effort to assist South Vietnam in halting the communist insurgency into the country, the beginnings of the United States military effort can be seen as early as 1950. It is by examining this advisory period from 1950 to 1960 that one may see the early roots of direct United States military intervention in Vietnam.

From 1950 to 1954, the American effort in Indo-China consisted mainly of support for the actions of the French in their attempt to re-establish a hold over their pre-World War II colonies in Southeast Asia. Although the French began this attempt confident of success, they were not supported by the United States at the outset. These policies would change with the success of the Vietnamese Nationalist movement led by Ho Chi Minh.

In early 1947 the Truman administration reached the conclusions concerning the communist ties of Ho and his revolution that would set the tone for United States policy for the two following decades.¹ After attempting to remain "pro-French neutral"² for three years, it was in 1950 after the communist's takeover of China and the possibility of a French defeat in Indo-China that the United States began to take the first steps that would begin the policy of containment of communism in Southeast Asia and the espousing of the ideals which became known as the domino theory. The worries over the spread of communism in Southeast Asia, along with the desire of the United States to gain continued French support for NATO in Europe were major factors that contributed to American assistance of the French in Vietnam.³

In the four year period from 1950 to 1954, the United States not only took on an increasingly greater percentage of the cost of the French effort in the Indo-China war (roughly one-third by 1952), it also began an increased military presence in the region.⁴ In an effort to gain a small measure of influence over the way its dollars were being invested militarily, the United States set up what was known as the Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) in Saigon in 1952.⁵ This was the beginning of the American Military Advisory presence in South Vietnam which would

eventually direct the massive United States forces of the 1960s and 1970s.

While having many philosophical as well as practical differences with the French during the period 1950 to 1954, the United States government continued its support of the French cause. This support was strongly tested in January 1954 when the prospect of direct American military intervention was a possibility.⁶ The French were not only weary of fighting the Vietnamese Nationalists, but they were facing an ultimate showdown with the communist forces at the battle of Dien Bien Phu. With the placing of the Indo-China question on the agenda of the East-West conference to be held at Geneva in the spring of 1954, and the American decision not to support the French with United States air power at Dien Bien Phu, the French not only suffered a military defeat, but soon after, a great diplomatic loss as well.

Following the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu, the warring factions in the Indo-China conflict agreed at Geneva to a partition of Vietnam at the seventeenth parallel. This decision not only created two separate countries, it signified to the world the decline of French influence in the region. In response to the changes resulting from the Geneva meetings, President Dwight Eisenhower and his administration believed that the United States

could assist in developing a regime in Southeast Asia which had no colonial ties.⁷

Following through with this policy, the United States soon began an effort to promote freedom in Southeast Asia.⁸ In the four years of United States support for France, military aid had totalled \$2.6 billion,⁹ but the United States' goal of stopping the spread of communism had not been achieved. It was following the Geneva Accords and during the gradual pullout of French forces that the United States began to see itself as the principal defender of the ideals of freedom in Southeast Asia.

In 1954, the Eisenhower Administration began an attempt to increase the influence of the American military in the region and an expansion of economic aid to the new bulwark of democracy in Southeast Asia, the Republic of South Vietnam. The French, who had previously disdained any United States training of Vietnamese troops, allowed more American participation as their situation became worse.¹⁰ One of the primary objectives of this new United States aid program was to solidify the South Vietnamese Government militarily. Eisenhower's Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, "had insisted from the outset that the development of a strong modern army was a essential first step in promoting a stable government."¹¹ To this end, for the seven years following the Geneva settlement, military

assistance was over two-thirds of the overall United States total aid to South Vietnam.¹²

The United States military did not take on the responsibility for training the South Vietnamese without some skepticism. The Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) felt that in order to be successful, Saigon would need a "reasonably strong stable government," which was not in place in 1954. The National Security Council (NSC) disregarded the Pentagon concerns, and by NSC design, a joint French-American training force known as the Training Relations and Instruction Mission (TRIM) was established in 1954.¹³

Two years later, following the departure of the French, the United States assumed total responsibility for the training and building of the South Vietnamese military into an effective deterrent to communist aggression. The structure of this force was originally planned to "be adequate for performing the missions of maintaining internal security and providing a blocking force in event of external aggression while waiting action of the Manila Pact Powers."¹⁴ The man chosen by the United States Army to lead this buildup from October of 1955 to August of 1960 was a fifty-seven-year-old United States Army Lieutenant General, Samuel ("Hangin' Sam") Tankersley Williams.

As a military man, Williams was coming to the end of a long and distinguished career. In 1916, at the age of

sixteen, Williams had left his boyhood home of Denton, Texas, to enlist in the Texas National Guard as a private. From the start, Williams showed the ability to master his duties quickly. This trait would help his future career advancement, as was illustrated when Williams rose to the rank of line sergeant during his eleven-month service with the Texas State Militia during 1916 to 1917.

Although Williams was eager to enter the military, he postponed his enlistment until May to complete his high school graduation requirements. But Williams left Denton before the graduation ceremony was held. Sam's desire to rush into the service of his country was heavily influenced by the attacks upon the United States of the bandit Pancho Villa in March of that same year."

Sam saw no action with the Texas Guard; yet his experience served him well as he was accepted for officer's training in the United States Army following the United States declaration of war on Germany in 1917. In what has been considered in retrospect a "patriotic" action," at this early point in his military career, Sam's birth certificate was falsified in order to qualify him for the twenty-one-year-old minimum age requirement for completion of the program. This move would become a problem for the young Texan almost forty-two years later while he was serving in Vietnam.

After completing the officer training program in 1917, Williams became a Second Lieutenant of Infantry. It was at this time that he received his "Hangin' Sam" nickname. As Williams related it:

I was stationed in Camp Swift, Texas in command of the 378th Infantry, the 95th Division, and a soldier [who was] a truck driver, picked up a nine or ten year old girl that lived in Bastrop [near the camp] . . . and he raped this child [brutally] . . . We had conclusive proof he was the murderer. A court martial was convened and I was a member of the court . . . [As the defense and the prosecution paraded psychiatrists to the stand to argue the question of the man's sanity, Williams] . . . speaking too quickly and probably not very smartly . . . said, 'Well, we don't give a damn what the psychiatrists say, the man is proven guilty and we're going to hang him and we might as well get this over as quick as we can.' . . . The news got out and people started calling me 'Hangin' Sam'.¹⁷

Not long after he received his nickname, Williams was called to fight for his country in World War I, where he saw action in France in the famed Ninetieth (Texas-Oklahoma) Division (in which he would serve as assistant division commander in World War II). As a rifle company commander,

he was wounded three times (once seriously) in the Meuse-Argonne battles in very heavy action." After a stint in the postwar army of occupation, he returned to the United States where he continued his military career.

Williams chose the army over a college education, but this did not dissuade him from trying to improve himself. Through reading and hard work, he advanced his general and military knowledge, as well as his written command of the English language.¹⁹ The soldier who matured during the twenty-two years between wars was not a man with an outstanding service record; yet Williams had made a name for himself in the United States Army. He was known as a man of "rugged strength of character and a forceful domineering spirit,"²⁰ as well as a "man capable of making quick decisions, which were rarely in error. Sam had also shown that he was normally well studied and prepared for the situations he would face."²¹ However, Sam was also known for "unhesitatingly speaking his mind, [even when] he should have remained quiet."²²

Williams rose through the Infantry School (1926 through 1931), where he was asked to stay on as an instructor, but declined.²³ From 1933 through 1935, he attended the Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, where he became a distinguished graduate of the same class which produced future Generals Maxwell Taylor, Matthew Ridgeway,

Mark Clark, and Walter Bedell Smith.²⁴ Williams followed in 1937 and 1938 by graduating with a high class standing from the Army War College.²⁵

Continuing his advancement, Williams was promoted to colonel in August of 1942, following the United States entry into World War II nine months earlier.²⁶ In 1944, he took part in the Normandy landing on Utah Beach and five campaigns in Europe. During this time he commanded the 378th Infantry Regiment, was G-3 and chief of staff of the XXII Corps, and served as temporary division commander of the 90th Division.²⁷ It was during his tour of Europe in World War II that Williams received the worst setback of his military career. On 16 July, 1944, the then Brigadier General Williams was relieved of his duties as assistant division commander of the Ninetieth Division and reduced in rank to lieutenant colonel.²⁸

The division commander who had taken the division to France had been relieved of his command on 10 June, due to the poor performance of the Division. On 15 July [their thirty-eighth day of battle], the new division commander [Major General E. M. Landrum] informed Williams of his request for Sam's reassignment. In this action, Landrum requested Williams relief due to the fact that:

he [Williams] is not calm of temper, is excitable, and these traits needlessly affect those with whom he deals

. . . His manner of speech is pessimistic and has caused me to lose confidence in the accuracy of his reports . . . [He is] not always discreet or temperate of speech . . . his first impulse is to adopt a defensive attitude (when criticized). . .²⁹

Although this incident was a setback to Williams's career, it seemed that he was the victim of a general "housecleaning" of the Ninetieth Division. As described by Lieutenant General Omar Bradley:

I was very sorry to have to send Sam Williams back. I had held on to him for several days until I could make a more thorough investigation. As you know, we have had a lot of trouble with that division. I don't know whose fault it is, but in order to try and solve it, we have had to change a lot of the senior officers in the division.³⁰

Following the war, Williams joined the First Division and was placed in command of the First Military District of occupied Germany at Nuremburg, during the War Crimes Trials. (some people incorrectly believe that it was here that he gained his nickname).³¹ During this command Williams's regiment was expected to lead the way up the disputed Autobahn against the Soviets, if required, during the Berlin Crisis. After serving as chief of staff and assistant division commander, he returned to the United States and

served for two years as assistant G-3, Office of the Chief of Army Field Forces.³²

In 1952 "Hanging Sam" began the work in Asia that would lead to the command of MAAG Vietnam. Williams was sent to Korea to command the Twenty-fifth Division, which his corps commander praised as "trained to a razor-sharp edge . . . The Twenty-fifth Division is the best trained infantry division I have seen in any army, of any country, in any era."³³ The Twenty-fifth met and helped assure the failure of the last great Chinese offensive in the Korean War. While in Korea, Williams was also given his first opportunity to command foreign troops. Under his command were United Nations troops of six different nations.³⁴

Following the Armistice in July 1953, Williams was assigned to train the Republic of Korea (ROK) forces, where his training ability was again applauded. After briefly stopping to command United States occupation troops in Japan, Williams returned to Texas in 1954 to become deputy commander of the Fourth Army in San Antonio, a duty that lasted until October 1955 when he was asked to become commander of the MAAG in Vietnam.³⁵

By 1955, this distinguished career, combined with numerous decorations for bravery and valor, helped to raise Hangin' Sam's military capabilities to near legendary status.³⁶ But in the minds of many, this positive reputation

was eclipsed by Williams's "insistence on rigid discipline" and dispensing of "vicious tongue lashings" for unacceptable behavior, that had also become well-known throughout the Army.³⁷ As described by one soldier under his command, General Williams possessed a "brief withering look [which] filtered down [in the command] to the darkest cranny of the lowest echelon."³⁸ Perhaps the most novel description of Williams's command style came from noted anti-guerrilla specialist, Air Force General Edward G. Lansdale:

His roars could be heard all over MAAG headquarters buildings, as one luckless soul after another stood before him while the wrath poured down over his head. [Williams'] most frequent charge was that the [offending] officer was running his work "like the Texas state militia and this damn better change." Strong men were driven to tears.³⁹

General Williams's physical demeanor "showed the strength and power of his chosen profession." Although he was of average height, his strong facial features were accented by a dark mustache. He was always smartly dressed, and he looked the part of a hardnosed military commander. Williams was a soldier of the Old Army, and he was known by his superiors as a man who could get a job done.⁴⁰

Williams married Jewel Spear on 21 September 1921, and often brought her to the various posts where he served.

Although they had no children, she remained a solid influence in his life during the sixty-three years of their marriage. Jewel's influence on Williams was later illustrated when he jokingly wrote of his decision to extend his tenure in Vietnam that, "Both the President and the people I work for have been after me to continue longer. The problem has been getting Jewel to agree."⁴¹

The general was not tolerant of improper behavior in his command, yet he treated his men fairly and was "fundamentally concerned and cared for his soldiers."⁴² This man, who was described as "one of the great men of the Army,"⁴³ and "a disciplinarian...who inspired strong feelings in all who knew him...."⁴⁴, became the man chosen to assist the armed forces of South Vietnam in their attempt to stop the spread of communism.

ENDNOTES

¹George Herring, America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975 (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1986), 10.

²Ibid.

³Ibid., 14.

⁴Ibid., 20.

⁵Ronald H. Spector, Advice and Support: The Early Years of the United States Army in Vietnam 1941 - 1960 (New York: The Free Press, 1985), 116.

⁶Herring, Longest, 29.

⁷Ibid., 39.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid., 42.

¹⁰Spector, Advice, 221.

¹¹Herring, Longest, 57.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Andrew F. Krepinevich, The Army and Vietnam (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 20.

¹⁴United States Department of State, Foreign Relations of the United States (hereafter cited as FRUS), 1954 - 1957, 1: 426.

¹⁵Colonel Harold J. Meyers, Hanging Sam: A Military Biography of General Samuel T. Williams: From Pancho Villa to Vietnam (Denton: The University of North Texas Press, in print after August, 1990), 15.

¹⁶General Services Administration, National Archives and Record Service, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Oral History Interview of Elbridge Durbrow, 3 June 1981, (hereafter cited as Durbrow Interview), tape 1, 15. See also Meyers, 27.

¹⁷General Services Administration, National Archives and Records Service, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Oral History Interview of Samuel T. Williams, (hereafter cited as Williams Interview), 3 March 1981, Tape 1, 3-4.

¹⁸Meyers, Sam, 141.

¹⁹Ibid., 23-24.

²⁰Ibid., 57.

²¹Ibid., 157.

²²Ibid., 57.

²³Ibid., 55.

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵J.J. Conner, "A Soldier Retires," Box 8 Miscellaneous Folder, 1, Samuel Tankersley Williams Papers, 1942-1980, Hoover Institution On War, Peace and Revolution, Stanford, California, (hereafter cited as Williams Papers).

²⁶Meyers, Sam, 57.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Major General E. M. Landrum to Major General Troy H. Middleton, 10 August 1944, Box 2, Personal Correspondence, 1944, Williams Papers.

²⁹Ibid. Major General Landrum's comments concerning Williams were not all negative. While informing Sam of his request, Landrum stated, "I do not question your personal bravery nor do I question your professional ability or your tactical judgement.... I do not know what your relationship was with [General] Terrel, but the fault lies in the lack of discipline and control of the division. It is in my best judgement that I ask, not for your relief, but your reassignment", see Colonel Samuel T. Williams to Commanding General, VIII Corps, APO 308, U.S. Army, 15 July 1944, Box 2, Personal Correspondence, 1944, Williams Papers.

³⁰Lieutenant General Omar Bradley to Brigadier General Pleas B. Rogers, 9 August 1944, Box 2, Personal Correspondence, 1944, Williams Papers.

³¹Durbrow Interview, 49.

³²Conner, "A Soldier Retires," 2

³³Ibid.

³⁴Ibid. Under Williams's command during this period was a Turkish brigade that had a habit of "never seeming to be on time". After many attempts at changing this habit, Williams finally told their commander, "You are dealing with two men now, Allah and Sam Williams. When you are late, Sam Williams is unhappy. When Sam Williams is unhappy, Allah is unhappy." From that point forward the Turks were reported to have been on time. (2) During June and July of 1953, Williams was "on loan" to the Republic of Korea (ROK) 2nd Corps, at the request of General Maxwell Taylor (Williams Interview), tape 1, 9.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶The San Antonio Light, 12 April 1984, 7B

³⁷Herring, Longest, 58

³⁸Connor, "A Soldier Retires," 3

³⁹Brigadier General Edward Geary Lansdale, USAF (RET), In the Midst of Wars: An American's Mission to Southeast Asia (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), 335.

⁴⁰Meyer, Sam, 109.

⁴¹Williams to Mr. and Mrs. E. A. Spear, 13 January 1958, Box 4, Personal Correspondence, Williams Papers.

⁴²Ibid., 159.

⁴³The Denton Record-Chronicle, 24 May 1959, section 1, 5. This quote was taken from a letter written to Williams' sister by Sam Rayburn, Speaker of the United States House of Representatives.

⁴⁴Spector, Advice, 275

CHAPTER II

TAKING COMMAND

The situation facing General Williams upon his arrival in Saigon on 24 October 1955 was one of confusion. In a purely political sense there were five groups claiming at least partial responsibility or potential influence in the region. French influence, though on the decline, was still a major presence, as the French military was still a considerable force in the South, and was also an integral part of the military forces of the fledgling government of South Vietnam. In 1954 the United States supported the anti-communist leader of the new republic, Ngo Dinh Diem, who rose to the post of Premier, with the ousting of Bao Dai.¹ While communist North Vietnamese influence in the South was not strong, the remnants of this group (known as the Viet Minh) were considered dormant while awaiting the outcome of the July, 1955 Vietnam-wide elections mandated by the Geneva Accords.

Along with these three political groups came another Geneva-created entity, the International Control Commission (ICC), created to be a neutral watchdog group to monitor the compliance of both sides with the Geneva Accords. The group was made up of three observer teams: one pro-western

(Canada), another pro-communist (Poland), and one marginally neutral team (India). The ICC's ultimate lack of success in ensuring enforcement of the Geneva provisions is clear enough, although the group's influence on the post-Geneva Vietnam situation cannot be disputed, because relations with the ICC were a continuing factor in United States policy decisions.² The fifth and most influential new entity in the region was the country team of the United States, made up primarily of the chiefs of the United States Embassy, the Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG), the United States Operations Mission (USOM), CIA, and United States Information Service.³ It was within the workings of the country team under the ambassador, that Williams was to direct MAAG to follow the military mandate of the Eisenhower administration.

Williams's arrived in Saigon on 24 October 1955 to replace the previous chief of MAAG, Lieutenant General John W. O'Daniel. Williams's arrival also brought about a change in title for the unit from MAAG, Indo-China to MAAG, Vietnam.' During his years in Saigon, O'Daniel had laid the groundwork for many of the changes Williams would make. Among these efforts were the creation of TRIM, and the initial changes in reorganization of the South Vietnamese army that led to the creation of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). But perhaps more importantly he presided

over the shift in direction of MAAG planning concerning the training of South Vietnam forces. It was following the creation of TRIM that "it [became] easier for the Army to envision a Korean-type threat in Vietnam than a [guerrilla] insurgency which was totally alien to anything the United States had planned for previously."⁵

During 1955, most American leaders and military planners had become convinced that the gradual departure of the French and ensuing increase of American influence in Vietnam could only improve the situation there. This would occur "not only because of the superiority of United States methods but also because of differences in French and American doctrine."⁶ But General O'Daniel felt that more United States advisors were absolutely necessary to facilitate the changeover. Under the terms of the Geneva agreement, the United States advisory effort in Vietnam was only allowed 342 military personnel. An increase would only be possible if some way were found to get around this limit without violating the Agreement. Although the United States was not a signatory to the Accords, and the definition of what constituted "military personnel" was unspecified, the United States Department of State was adamant on the question of waving the 342-man limit.⁷ The question of how to increase the training mission was not yet resolved when

General Williams arrived in Saigon as the new leader of MAAG.

Williams was personally informed of his assignment to replace Lieutenant General O'Daniel by General Maxwell Taylor. In July 1955, Taylor became Chief of Staff, United States Army, and sent Williams a note asking if he knew of "any cogent reason why [Williams] shouldn't go to South Vietnam to relieve . . . General O'Daniel." Williams, known for his tough, no-nonsense attitude, had proven himself very capable in training foreign troops. He had also gained valuable experience in dealing with Asians during the Korean conflict. Williams's success in dealing with Asian military and political leaders was probably a key to his assignment to MAAG Vietnam, and his methods paid off in close relations with the Vietnamese. Sam knew the importance of allowing the Asian military men to "save face" when necessary, and always insisted that his men respect their military counterparts. As he expressed in a general list of "do's and don't's" for his command, "don't look down on the local forces, take too much control of the situation, or consider the group you are advising as 'second class'."⁹ Unquestionably, Williams's success in Korea had a direct effect on his assignment to Vietnam.

Prior to Williams's arrival, the overall tone of American military strategy in Vietnam had been set. The

entire area of Southeast Asia was seen as under siege by the homogeneous threat of communism. This was a theory held by most public men of the day.¹⁰ Thus the main threat to the safety of South Vietnam seemed to come from the communist North. As O'Daniel reported in August of 1955, with the gradual pullout of the French imminent,

There will soon be no force in Vietnam capable of blocking external aggression sufficiently to allow arrival of outside aid and the mobilization of additional Vietnamese forces. . . . It is my seriously considered view that Free Vietnam is at the critical point in its fight for freedom. . . . A position of military strength is basic to the attitude necessary for popular support of the Diem government."

General O'Daniel's reaction to this threat had been to build the South Vietnamese to a strength which could delay a communist attack long enough for South East Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO) forces to be brought in. These forces would then place the overwhelmed enemy in an untenable position, followed by South Vietnamese forces conducting a classic end run into North Vietnam.¹²

Although O'Daniel's plans were in line with those of the Pentagon, a Korean-type United States effort was just what Eisenhower and his limiting New Look policy wanted to avoid.¹³ This desire to restrict United States military

involvement in Vietnam while still drawing the line against communism in Asia was the key to many future United States movements in Vietnam. As a result of this desire, the inclination to build up the forces of the South Vietnamese in a conventional manner in order to stop a conventional threat from the Viet Minh and North Vietnamese became a constant in United States military advisory planning through 1960.

With the request for an augmentation of MAAG forces unresolved and continued political confusion in South Vietnam, General Williams was called to the Pentagon in early October of 1955 for a briefing prior to his departure for Saigon. He was briefed thoroughly by "everyone that you could imagine up there" and then sent on to the State Department. There he was asked if he spoke French (which he could not) and then "sat there and chatted pleasantly for maybe five or ten minutes," before being told "we hope you have a pleasant tour out there. Good morning."¹⁴ During his Pentagon briefings, Williams was given his assignment to "organize a military establishment in Vietnam that would be capable of fending off attacks from the North,"¹⁵ to support the Diem regime and be ready for an attack by July 1956.¹⁶

Upon his arrival in Saigon on 15 November 1955, the general faced many immediate problems. Beyond the fact that MAAG needed many more advisors to complete the task

assigned to him, Williams's predecessor did not leave "files nor reliable records nor anything of that nature,"¹⁷ making the transition more difficult. Before General O'Daniel left, however, he did brief Sam on the "existing historical conditions that influenced MAAG's mission."¹⁸ O'Daniel also delayed his departure to allow Williams to conduct a country-wide reconnaissance before assuming command.¹⁹ Although the transition was not an easy task, Williams would later praise O'Daniel's success with the extremely limited resources that had been available prior to September of 1955.

The MAAG transition and Williams's first tasks were complicated by the maneuverings of the French as well as the Vietnamese. Although the Americans were, in the words of Admiral Felix B. Stump, "very careful not to hurt the feelings of the French by trying to push them out," the policy of Diem and his government was to get the French out as soon as possible.²⁰ This idea was attributed by the French to the United States as well as to Diem.²¹ Diem's policy and the French reaction to it led to Williams facing "intrigue with Frenchmen on one side and Vietnamese, who hate the Frenchmen's guts, on the other."²²

The general's reaction to this problem was to tell his men that he would "not tolerate either pro- or anti-French conduct, either in correspondence or official or private

personal relations."²³ The problem eventually ended with the gradual pullout of French troops. By February 1956, only 15,000 French troops remained, and 10,000 more left in March, leaving just a "few [French] instructors remain[ing] at TRIM."²⁴

The French pullout not only created a new problem for MAAG, but also offered a new opportunity to bypass the advisor limit stipulated by the Geneva Accords. While leaving in relative haste, the French had also abandoned a large amount of military equipment, much of which had been supplied by the United States to the French for use in the war. This equipment was to return to the control of the United States, and the value of the equipment was estimated at nearly \$1.2 billion.²⁵ A United States team which was sent to Vietnam to examine the situation found that the French had not kept reliable records on the equipment and much of it was lying in open storage areas.²⁶ Seizing upon this opportunity to increase the number of Americans assigned to Vietnam, the Pentagon convinced the Department of State to "acquiesce in the creation of the Temporary Equipment Recovery Mission (TERM)."²⁷

The American-supplied equipment, which was more than the ARVN was capable of using in 1955, was to be "sorted, protected, and kept up" by the 350 members of the TERM team.²⁸ The position of the ICC was one of "neither approval

or disapproval"²⁹ of the TERM mission, although the State Department, worried over a possible negative reaction by the ICC, warned that "military training in no case should be allowed to become the single or even primary duty of the mission."³⁰ State Department restraint over the TERM project and continuous ICC scrutiny led to many delays in its implementation. As the delays became longer, General Williams commented that "there have been more messages and meetings generated by TERM than by the Battle of the Bulge."³¹ It became obvious that MAAG viewed TERM as an opportunity to gain an increase in advisors, as by the end of 1957, only 7 of the 350 TERM workers were engaged in the actual recovery of military material.³² The TERM workers "relieved MAAG of logistical responsibilities, thus freeing MAAG personnel for training. Thereafter, the MAAG training program gained momentum."³³

Although the TERM group allowed for a much needed increase in United States advisors, General Williams's main goal of helping to create a South Vietnamese fighting force with the capability of defending the country remained a monumental task. The main problem in this regard was the lack of organization in the ARVN. This problem was worsened because the French-created South Vietnam military structure had few if any Vietnamese officers of command rank, nor was there much real organization of high leadership among the

Vietnamese themselves." Along with a lack of leadership, these units suffered from major logistical problems as well. Williams characterized the ARVN as a group of "150,000 . . . with a completely inadequate number of ordinance, signal, and medical units. . . . They have a great difficulty with supply, communications, and they do not grasp the importance of chain of command."³⁵ Not only were there some battalion-sized forces which seemed to have no real communication with the central command in Saigon, the senior command had to send orders by commercial telephone or messenger to the various division headquarters.³⁶

Initially, Williams found attempting the reorganization of the ARVN to be difficult:

I find this assignment the most challenging of my life. Pure combat or commanding anything from a regiment to an army is a "breeze" compared to this. . . . The French, the Vietnamese and the Sects will attempt to change the rules in the middle of the game and when cornered will state 'it's a misunderstanding due to faulty interpreters,' or else . . . give no reason at all. Oddly enough, here they do not seem to consider it loss of "face" when so detected.³⁷

There were also problems within the Vietnamese forces themselves, as Williams explained when describing the differences he perceived between the Vietnamese and the

Koreans:

The greatest difference . . . is in the background of the officers and NCO's . . . [South Vietnamese] officers [have a] white glove or "clean hands" code that forbids an officer [from] doing any instruction, . . . training, or detailed inspecting for fear of losing face. [This] had to be overcome. Additionally, for 80 years they've been belittled and told they had limited capability. . . . Possibly the greatest difference in results is that every thing I do must be by persuasion.³⁸

Even with these problems, General Williams saw progress and hope on the horizon. "The Vietnamese forces are very young. . . . However, they are intelligent and will learn new methods rapidly."³⁹ "Our relationship with [them] is excellent. . . . All in all we are making definite progress."⁴⁰ In order to continue that progress, Williams felt the advisor-South Vietnamese spirit of cooperation should be supported. This end he brought the two groups together when possible. As described by an advisor on his staff:

. . . General Williams . . . had Colonel Tran Van Don come in and talk at the monthly Advisors' Conference, when unit advisors would come in from the field to meet in Saigon. Colonel Don would tell the Americans what

the Vietnamese officers thought of them, tactfully pointing out methods and mannerisms which needed correcting. Don had great skill at doing this and it was a most constructive action."

As for his own personal dealings with the Vietnamese, Williams sounded a positive note: "Fortunately my relations with the Vietnamese, I believe, are satisfactory."²

On the many occasions he met with Diem, Williams often found himself dealing with the South Vietnamese President on more than a military level: "Giving advice or training of forces gradually grew into being asked advice on other matters. . . . some entirely out of my field."³ The relationship between President Diem and General Williams quickly became a close one. Even though Sam was a "straight-shooter," the president "came to trust and to confide in Williams to an unusual degree."⁴ Sam's positive relationships carried over to many of the officers of the South Vietnamese armed forces as well, and as early as 1956, He realized the situation was "looked upon questionably by some in [United States] governmental service here . . . [e]specially when the matter [he had] discussed is more properly in [someone else's] field and they are not consulted."⁵ Williams's friendships caused a recurring dispute within the country team and would soon grow into a major issue for the general.

While reorganizing the South Vietnamese forces, Williams was faced with the same dilemma which had faced his predecessor, the question of what structure these forces would take. Although his major worry during the period 1955 to 1956 was over the military reaction of the communist forces to the cancelling for the Geneva-mandated elections, some evidence began to appear that a guerrilla insurgency was beginning. This included the infiltration of South Vietnamese divisions by the Viet Minh.⁴⁶

When faced with the same internal security problem, General O'Daniel had previously attempted to create a force which would be capable of handling the internal as well as external threat to the area. In principle, General Williams followed the same agenda. Yet he and O'Daniel were faced with two major issues when planning for this type of force. Due to limitations in United States funding, government planners desired to cut back the total size of the Vietnamese force to 100,000. At the same time it was the wish of President Diem to use the army to fight the problems posed by the anti-Diem groups known collectively as the Sects.⁴⁷ The decision concerning the development of a force more capable of pursuing conventional large-scale military operations versus counter-insurgency and anti-guerrilla capabilities was one of the key issues of the United States advisory effort of the 1950s.

In light of the full-scale guerrilla insurgency which began in 1959, this decision was pivotal in the overall United States effort in Vietnam. Although many who have viewed this decision from hindsight believe Williams and O'Daniel ignored the potential of the insurgency, the two generals did take the issue of guerrilla training for the South Vietnamese forces under consideration. Yet according to a prominent army historian they ". . . continued to make preparation for a conventional military attack the cornerstone of their advisory effort."⁴⁸

The reasoning of General Williams and General O'Daniel before him was not only based on the Korean War experience, which was still fresh in the minds of American military planners, but also on the perceived threat from North Vietnam. Williams had hoped initially to be partially prepared for an invasion by 20 July 1956. He was told this invasion might be imminent with the refusal of Diem to hold the Geneva-mandated elections.⁴⁹ This threat was uppermost in the mind of Williams during 1956. Following the lack of an immediate invasion in July and August, he was again put on alert to the possibility that [the North Vietnamese] "say they will give us sixty more days," to hold elections or an invasion would follow.⁵⁰ Sam had been told "that the Viet Minh strength in their regular army alone was something like 242,000 men," and he was later to state that "if Ho Chi Minh

had attacked at that time, . . . his army could have walked through Vietnam to Saigon standing up."⁵¹ The fear of invasion was still present, although the Army, JCS, and CINCPAC continued to state their belief that subversion was still a major threat to South Vietnam.⁵²

Williams's overriding concern was the threat of a communist invasion, and his original training plans and mandate reflected this concern. One of the hindrances to Williams's clear measurement of the insurgency threat was the lack of any proper military intelligence apparatus for MAAG. All of the intelligence reports received by MAAG came from the Commander-in-Chief, United States forces, Pacific (CINCPAC) with its headquarters in Hawaii, and were presumably gathered by the CIA.⁵³ It was Williams's opinion later that "due to their excellent spy system, [the North Vietnamese] apparently knew more about the real situation in South Vietnam during the period from 1954 to 1963 than Washington did."⁵⁴ It was with this limited base of information concerning the threat from insurgency and a mandate to support Diem that General Williams set out to help create a South Vietnamese Army.

ENDNOTES

¹Herring, Longest, 46.

²There was a belief within the MAAG group that some of the Indian and Polish members of the ICC were "perfect sources of intelligence information for Hanoi." General Services Administration, National Archives and Records Service, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Written Recollections of Peter A. Dul, Lieutenant Colonel, United States Army, March 28, 1981, 13.

³Lt. General Samuel T. Williams (Ret.), "Why the U.S. Is Losing in Vietnam - An Inside Story: Interview With Former Chief U. S. Military Adviser, Lieut. Gen. Samuel T. Williams, (Ret.)," U.S. News and World Report, 9 November 1964, 64, (hereafter cited as U.S. News).

⁴Spector, Advice, 256.

⁵Krepinevich, Army, 21.

⁶"Memo, DCSOPS for CofSA, 14 May 56, sub: U.S. Policy Toward Vietnam, CS 091 Vietnam, 319", as quoted in Spector, Advice, 255.

⁷Ibid., 256.

⁸Williams Interview, Tape I, 3.

⁹Command Directive, "Do's and Don'ts", Box 10, "Related to Vietnam", Williams Papers.

¹⁰Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., The Bitter Heritage: Vietnam and American Democracy 1941-1966 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1966), 14.

¹¹CHMAAG Indo-China to CINCPAC, Saigon, 9 August 1955, FRUS, 1955 - 1957, 1: 506.

¹²Spector, Advice, 268.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Williams Interview, Tape I, 6.

¹⁵Interview with Major General Ruggles by The Center For Military History, Washington, D.C., 27 February 1980, as quoted in Krepinevich, Army, 22. See Williams Interview, Tape II, 85.

¹⁶Williams to Admiral Felix Stump(Ret.), 15 October 1964, Box 19, Personal Correspondence, Williams Papers.

¹⁷Williams Interview, Tape I, 12.

¹⁸Meyers, Sam, 139.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰FRUS, 1955-1957, 1: 636.

²¹Stump to Williams, 16 September 64, Box 19, Personal Correspondence, Williams Papers.

²²Williams to Ed Finck, 23 January 1956, Box 5, Personal Correspondence, Williams Papers.

²³Williams to Chuck Thomas, 15 March 1956, Ibid.

²⁴"Franco-Vietnam Differences, Autumn 1955", United States Department of Defense, United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967: A Study Prepared by the Department of Defense, (hereafter cited as Pentagon Papers), 1: 39.

²⁵Spector, Advice, 257.

²⁶"United States Training of the VNA, 1954-1959", Pentagon Papers, 2: 19.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Spector, Advice, 262.

²⁹Ibid. The TERM group was forced to delay departure for Saigon in order to prevent their arrival on the same day as an ICC flight from Hanoi, which might create an embarrassing incident. Williams to Autrey, 25 May 1956, Box 5, Folder 2, Williams Papers.

³⁰Spector, Advice, 262.

³¹Williams to Admiral R.E. Libby, 18 May 1956, Box 5, Personal Correspondence, Williams Papers.

³²Spector, Advice, 262.

³³Pentagon Papers, 2: 20.

³⁴U.S. News, 68.

³⁵Williams to Chuck Thomas, 15 March 1956, Box 5, Personal Correspondence, Williams Papers.

³⁶General Statements in Reply to U.S. News and World Report Article, 11 September 1964, 3, Box 8, Miscellaneous File, Williams Papers.

³⁷Williams to Ed Finck, 23 January 1956, Box 5, Personal Correspondence, Williams Papers.

³⁸Williams to General James A. Van Fleet, USA (Ret.), 8 September 1958, Box 4, Personal Correspondence, Williams Papers.

³⁹Williams to General Chung, 30 April 1956, Box 4, Personal Correspondence, Williams Papers.

⁴⁰Williams to Chuck Thomas, 15 March 1956, Ibid.

⁴¹Lansdale to McGarr, Washington, D.C., 11 August 1960, FRUS, 1958-1960, 1: 533.

⁴²Williams to Brigadier General Joseph B. Crawford, 28 May 1956, Ibid.

⁴³Williams to General Kruger, 14 April 1956, Ibid.

⁴⁴Spector, Advice, 275.

⁴⁵Williams to General Kruger, 14 April 1956, Box 5, Personal Correspondence, Williams Papers.

⁴⁶Williams to Colonel Bykerk, 15 February 1956, Ibid.

⁴⁷Spector, Advice, 265.

⁴⁸Ibid., 272.

⁴⁹Williams to Chuck Thomas, 15 March 1956, Box 5, Personal Correspondence, Williams Papers.

⁵⁰Williams to Brigadier General Joseph B. Crawford, August 1956, Ibid.

⁵¹U.S. News, 67.

⁵²Spector, Advice, 272.

⁵³Ibid. General O'Daniel had admitted in 1955 that "It is impossible to estimate the accurate strength . . . of the Viet Minh. . . ." (CHMAAG Indo-China to CINCPAC, Saigon, 9 August 1955, FRUS, 1955 - 1957, 1: 506).

⁵⁴Text of speech made to Denton, Texas Kiwanis Club, 11 May 1965, Box 7, Miscellaneous File, Williams Papers.

CHAPTER III

ARVN - A SEARCH FOR A STRATEGY

Lacking a reliable intelligence-gathering capability, General Williams continued to view an external invasion as his main concern throughout 1956. Having seen progress in the reorganization of the ARVN from its confused beginnings of the previous year, Williams now began an attempt to equip, supply, and train the new South Vietnamese forces. This began a three-year period when the general discovered the difficulty involved in balancing political, fiscal, personal, and military concerns while attempting to create a South Vietnamese force that would support Diem.

Viewing Williams's moves years later, his critics have accused him of attempting to recreate the ARVN as a mirror image of the United States Army.' In some respects this accusation is correct, yet the causes of this similarity had little relation to a desire on Williams's part to recreate a United States army with South Vietnamese soldiers.

Williams's initial decision on the type of training needed by the ARVN forces was, as he described it "not made in haste."² After a one-year study of the type of organization and equipment they desired for their forces, a board of South Vietnamese officers designed a force which

they believed would be successful in the defense of their country. The board studied all types of foreign divisions. The necessary troops were assembled and various types of reorganization were field tested. Adjustments were made and "these were also field tested again and again."³ The GVN, MAAG, CINCPAC, and the Pentagon approved the final decision. The approval of the various United States agencies was necessary in view of the fact that the United States was furnishing ninety-four percent of the pay of the troops and one hundred percent of the equipment.' By mid-1956, the South Vietnamese, with some United States input and assistance, made the decision on the type of infantry division they felt was "best suited to their personnel, their country, and their available manpower."⁵ The question of exactly how much influence the United States advisors had on this decision is a key one. As Williams described it,

As all knowledgeable people were aware, [he] did not throw the Light Divisions into discard and build the Vietnam Army on the model of the United States Army 'heavy' divisions. . . . Actually, there was little similarity between the [Vietnamese] division and any type of the United States infantry division then or now."⁶

What were the ultimate differences between the United States and South Vietnamese divisions? One key point raised

by Williams's detractors was the idea that the Vietnam divisions were road bound in a country where there would be few opportunities to employ large vehicles and even fewer roads to use them on.' The idea that the South Vietnamese divisions were road bound was disputed by Williams. Motor transport was cut to the bare minimum. To replace the vehicles, a hand cart transport force based on a previously successful Korean model was created. These groups were organized for attachment to military units during wartime. Each two-man hand cart was capable of carrying up to 250 pounds, and could move wherever men could walk two abreast. Firepower was limited as well, with "no piece of necessary equipment included in the Tables [of equipment] of a division that could not be broken down into hand or cart carry loads." In addition, each division was organized in a manner that would allow for easy break down into smaller sized units if necessary.'

Yet the South Vietnamese divisions did have many similarities to their United States counterparts. Although General Williams believed he was assisting in the creation of an army uniquely suited for the defense of South Vietnam, he began his task with an inherent handicap. United States military aid was supplied to South Vietnam based on approved Tables of Organization and Equipment (TO&E). These tables were the facts and figures used to request aid through the

Washington bureaucracy. It would have been difficult at best for Williams to push through any concepts or requests for the ARVN TO&E which were radically different from those used for United States forces. As was proven later in his attempts to make small adjustments to the ARVN forces, the bureaucracy involved in the United States aid to the country was not easily moved from its previous habits. Since the ARVN was to be equipped, supplied, and trained with United States support, a resemblance to the organization of the United States Army was inevitable.

Although his primary assignment was to train the ARVN, General Williams spent much of his time not involved in training in an attempt to work with the rest of the country team on the many discussions over the budgeting of the United States aid program. The two main United States entities General Williams dealt with in Vietnam were the United States Embassy (representing the State Department) and the USOM (United States Operations Mission, assigned the task of supporting the economic growth of the country). Although Williams was acknowledged by the country team as the military authority, the final word on all actions of the team officially belonged to the ambassador. President Eisenhower established this hierarchy for all country teams through Executive Order 10895,⁹ an order which led to many difficulties for Williams during his tenure in Vietnam.

In order to gain needed equipment, personnel, and other aid for the ARVN forces, the general was initially required to convince the ambassador of that particular need. In turn, the ambassador sought advice from his staff, who often "were not familiar with military weapons, tactics, or organization." The concurrence of the USOM director was also required for any proposed project. As was the case with the ambassador, the director consulted his advisors, who were also a group with limited military background. If the request passed muster with these two groups, it was then presented to the remaining members of the country team, where it would be required to withstand any further objections. From the country team the request would be forwarded to MAAG's next highest military superior at Unified Command, to be scrutinized by yet another staff of advisors. Following approval of Unified Command in Hawaii, the request then went to Washington to face the State Department and the Department of Defense before final judgment was passed. In referring to his difficulties under this system, Williams stated that "all too often he [had] to get his request through a maze of second and third echelon military and civilian staff members" who do not realize that the policy of the United States is to support South Vietnam.¹⁰

Although General Williams ran into difficulty with the bureaucracy on many occasions, his most notable and longest lasting conflict came over the question of control of the major South Vietnamese internal security force, known as the Civil Guard. The question of internal security, or how to keep the country politically stable while preparing for an external threat was a hotly debated subject from the first day of Williams's tenure. Obviously, an important person in this effort was President Diem.

While attempting to consolidate his government in 1955, President Diem faced a major challenge to his leadership from three major religious/political groups, collectively known as the sects. The Cao Dai and Hoa Hoa were religious groups, while the Binh Xuyen were known mainly as an outlaw "mafia" type of organization. With assistance from General O'Daniel and later General Williams, Diem managed to use the South Vietnamese armed forces to defeat and practically eliminate these groups as a threat to his government by 1956. Combined with what seemed to be promising economic progress at the time, the defeat of the sects became part of what was to be known as the Diem Miracle. These victories were not only a turning point in the United States support of Diem, but also set the tone for the use of the ARVN to solve future internal security problems.

The defeat of the sects was by no means the end of South Vietnam's problems. As guerrilla attacks began and continued after 1956, more often than not the ARVN forces themselves were called on to attack and mop-up the insurgents." This continued diversion of troops from their training schedules slowed the progress being made and was a constant source of irritation for General Williams."

The alternative to the use of the ARVN for internal security was to implement the array of internal security forces which Williams inherited upon his arrival. The two major groups were the Civil Guard (approximately 54,000 in 1955) and the Self Defense Force (approximately 50,000 in 1955). The Civil Guard was a mobile, full-time force, while the Self Defense Force was a volunteer, static militia force." Both were in bad shape in 1955. Suffering from French neglect, the lack of armament, poor training, and poor organization had hindered their development.

The battle over ultimate control and responsibility for training these groups raged for the entire length of Williams's tour in Vietnam and beyond. In attempting to train the Civil Guard, the USOM brought in experts on police and para-military training from Michigan State University to handle the task. The effort they made was directed at turning the Civil Guard into a "Penn State Police or Texas Ranger type force." Contrary to the designs of the USOM,

it was Diem's desire to turn the Civil Guard into a group that could assist the regular Army in war if necessary. To this end, the President asked that the group be funded by the United States as an entity which would remain under the control of the South Vietnamese Interior Ministry during peacetime, while actually being trained by the Defense Ministry. Defense Ministry control would ultimately give command of the Civil Guard to Diem himself if he deemed it necessary. Diem's motivation for this desire is disputed. According to one theory, Diem wanted the Civil Guard to "become a force to counter the power of a possibly disloyal army."¹⁵ However, Diem seemed to have made his intentions on the Civil Guard clear as early as November of 1955, when he told then Ambassador Reinhardt that "it was not his intention that the Civil Guard be an adjunct to the army, but that it was inevitable that . . . it would [have to] function as an auxiliary force to the military [until the insurgency was ended]."¹⁶

General Williams's opinion on the Civil Guard reflected his pragmatic approach towards political disputes. While the general had little concern over the group's political ideals, he was looking to the Civil Guard to take over for the ARVN in anti-guerrilla operations, thus freeing the Army to continue uninterrupted training schedules.¹⁷ However, Williams and Diem did have similar reservations concerning

the plan put forth by the United States Ambassador concerning the Civil Guard. This plan called for the Civil Guard to be trained and controlled by the South Vietnamese Interior Ministry, retaining the Civil Guard as a police type force under the influence of the Embassy and the USOM. The argument over control of the Civil Guard would split the country team as well as the United States State and Defense Departments from 1957 to 1961.

The disagreement over the Civil Guard was very similar to many of the points of friction created by the two distinct outlooks which emerged over the United States aid effort in Vietnam. On numerous occasions, questions over policy matters would arise which seemed to pit General Williams and Diem on one side of an argument and the ambassador and the USOM on the other.¹⁶ Although there were many variations to this struggle, one constant was seen throughout. Because the United States aid budget for Vietnam in the late 1950s was much smaller and more hotly contested than it would become later under the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, the allocation of aid to South Vietnam became one of the main arguments within the country team.

As the mission progressed, two distinct directions of fund allocation seemed to emerge. The USOM, charged with the economic growth of the country, felt that the primary

emphasis should have been on supporting the economy first and building the military second. This was the general view of Leland Barrows, the USOM director, as well as that of the ambassador.¹⁹ On the other side of this argument was President Diem, who desired economic growth, but was preoccupied by the internal as well as external military threat to his government. Following the military line, Williams agreed with Diem's attitude, as supporting the military first would allow the general to follow his original mandate. Although both factions were cognizant of the needs of South Vietnam in both the military and economic areas, each new request, idea, budget, and adjustment became a point of contention between the two, with both vying for their share of the limited (though generous) American aid package.

The funding rivalry was exacerbated by the fact that there was no true referee between the two sides. Although disputes were technically to be mediated by the Operation and Control Board of the National Security Council, chaired by the Secretary of State, this group had little real authority, and other than President Eisenhower himself, no single individual in Washington was in charge of the United States aid program for Vietnam.²⁰

With a situation of little or no strict control from Washington, progress in South Vietnam depended upon

compromise within the country team as well as cooperation among the participants. This cooperation was limited by the personal animosity which developed between General Williams and the man who became United States Ambassador in March of 1957, Elbridge Durbrow.

General Williams's relationship with the previous United States Ambassador, Frederick Reinhardt, had been one of civility, though not friendship. Although the two disagreed at times over policy decisions, Reinhardt did not chose to exercise strong control over United States aid programs. The evolution of the aid system brought about differing programs which tended to go their own direction and develop their own channels to Washington as well.²¹ Upon arriving in Saigon, Durbrow chose a different approach than that of his predecessor.²² The new ambassador became more involved in all aspects of the aid program, and General Williams did not welcome this stronger management style. Beginning with these ideological differences, the relationship between the two deteriorated. Williams's straight-forward harsh manner did not please Durbrow, and the two began to clash over each major policy decision made by the country team. As their personal animosity increased, the split between the State Department and Department of Defense also intensified. Often during their co-tenure in Vietnam, the men would disagree over many minor matters,

which was a reflection of their antagonistic personal relationship. Although both men attempted to place the best face on the situation, this period of "declining cordiality" was a true hinderance to the overall United States aid effort.²³

One area of contention between the two men was the very close relationship that developed between General Williams and President Diem. Originally, Williams gained Diem's confidence by not only being a straight shooter when it came to evaluating a situation, but also by showing respect for his Vietnamese comrades. As described by one of Williams's assistants, "General Williams [was] in a position of influence in large part because he was damn careful of his facts with Diem and other Vietnamese before talking and earned the reputation with Diem and other Vietnamese of being worth listening to."²⁴ Williams normally defended Diem and his policies, as he felt that he had originally been instructed to do, even after the 1963 coup which cost the president his life.²⁵ Conversely, Durbrow's opinion of Diem deteriorated with time. As Diem continued to emphasize the support of the South Vietnamese military over the development of its economy, Durbrow's opinion of the president and his policies lessened.²⁶ Durbrow also became very worried over the creation of the Can Lao, a pro-Diem political group which became embedded in the government of

Vietnam (GVN), as well as the ARVN, and contributed to Durbrow's belief that Diem was becoming a dictator, rather than the leader of a free nation which was desired by many United States officials.²⁷

Many in the United States Department of State agreed with Durbrow's assumption that Williams's relationship with Diem had become too personal, and that the president was using his influence to cloud the general's decision-making ability, in order to increase his powers as a dictator. Williams himself denied such charges, defending his initial relationship with Diem as warranted due to Diem's role as his own Minister of Defense. In Williams's opinion, holding this post made Diem the most important South Vietnamese official the general was to deal with.²⁸

Williams disagreed with Durbrow's reading of Diem's intentions as well. In the general's mind, Durbrow's attempts to force United States policies upon Diem by using the economic coercion created by United States monetary leverage over Diem's government was not always the correct approach.²⁹ Oftentimes, Williams thought that Durbrow was spending "too much effort on his own agenda for Vietnam and not enough toward supporting President Diem and the Vietnamese people."³⁰

Diem's disagreements with Durbrow led to a mutual distrust between the two allies. This situation was made

worse by the many informal conversations held between Williams and Diem. These talks were often very long and covered far-ranging military as well as personal topics. This was disturbing to Durbrow because he was not often asked to visit the president for anything other than official business, a reaction that Williams later described as "jealousy".²¹

The major disagreement between Williams and Durbrow was the dispute over the Civil Guard. Because of the bureaucratic wrangling which occurred over this internal defense unit, its development, supply, and implementation against guerrilla forces was severely hindered. At the height of the controversy, Durbrow and his allies attempted to force Diem to allow the Interior Department to maintain control of the force by withholding the United States funding of the Guard for 1958. While the Civil Guard awaited its funding, ARVN forces continued to be forced into action against small guerrilla groups, thus slowing the ARVN training. In response, Williams tried different methods to keep the ARVN from being used in pacification duties. In an attempt to bypass the road block placed in his path by Durbrow, General Williams attempted to circumvent the country team to provide the Civil Guard with needed weapons by bypassing the ambassador's authority and going directly to the Pentagon.²² Upon discovery of this and other similar

moves by Williams, Durbrow created a directive which forced the general to clear all of his communications to Washington through the Embassy before transmission.³³

This continuing friction over the Civil Guard hindered the development of the internal security forces of South Vietnam, and is pointed to by many as a key to the lack of preparedness for an insurgency shown by the ARVN in 1959. Thus, while Williams began to show success in the training of the ARVN as a deterrent to a conventional attack from the North, the general was unable to match this effort with the development of a strong internal security force.

ENDNOTES

¹U.S. News, 68.

²Williams to Admiral Felix Stump, 3 November 1964, Box 19, Miscellaneous Personal Correspondence, Williams Papers.

³Ibid.

⁴General Statements in Reply to U.S. News & World Report Article (Working Paper), 11 September 1964, 3, Box 8, Miscellaneous File, Williams Papers.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid.

⁷U. S. News, 68.

⁸Ibid., 4.

⁹"Responsibility for Coordination and Supervision of Programs and Actions of All U.S. Agencies," 21 December 1960, Box 14, 11, Elbridge Durbrow Papers, 1938-1982, Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace, Stanford, California.

¹⁰Williams to Ed Lansdale, 30 August 1961, Box 9, Personal Correspondence, Williams Papers.

¹¹Spector, Advice, 278.

¹²Ibid., 294.

¹³Ibid., 320.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Ibid., 321.

¹⁶"Memo of a Conversation, Saigon, 7 November 1955," FRUS, 1958 - 1960, 1: 571.

¹⁷Spector, Advice, 322.

¹⁸"Memo for the Record, by the Assistant Secretary of the United States Army General Staff," Washington, 16 April 1957, FRUS, 1955 - 1957, 1: 786. One such incident dealt with the desire of General Williams and Diem to build a east-west strategic road, while the USOM felt the road should be built on a north-south line along the coast.

¹⁹The beginning of this conflict was seen as early as May 1955, when an Embassy official expressed worry not only over where aid would come from for increased South Vietnamese force levels, but also over the potential inflationary effect of this aid on the South Vietnamese economy. (See "Letter from the Counselor," FRUS, 1955 - 1957, 1: 424.) It was during early October 1957 that the question of economic versus military aid for Diem became an important one. Diem stated at this time that if a choice between cutting military funds and those for economic growth must be made, he felt that "economic growth would have to wait." (See Williams to Vice Admiral G.W. Anderson, Saigon, 2 October 1957," FRUS, 1955 - 1957, 1: 644.) Shortly after Diem's statement, Durbrow began to critically question his desires, which were supported by General Williams. (See Williams to Durbrow, Saigon, 9 October 1957," FRUS, 1955 - 1957, 1: 846.)

²⁰Spector, Advice, 277.

²¹Ibid., 275.

²²Ibid., 276.

²³CHMAAG (Williams) to CINCPAC (Stump), 16 November 1957, FRUS, 1955 - 1957, 1: 862.

²⁴Lansdale to McGarr, Washington, 11 August 1960, FRUS, 1958 - 1960, 1: 533.

²⁵U.S. News, 69.

²⁶"Country Team Evaluation of Situation in Vietnam: December 1957," FRUS, 1955 - 1957, 1: 872.

²⁷Durbrow to Parsons, FRUS, 1958 - 1960, 1: 170.

²⁸U.S. News, 72.

²⁹FRUS, 1955 - 1957, 1: 856. Durbrow threatened to withhold funds for internal security in a country team meeting on 5 November 1957.

³⁰Williams Interview, Tape II, 15.

³¹Lansdale to Williams, 14 March 1958, FRUS, 1958 - 1960, 1: 26. Williams was assisted in this endeavor by the suggestions of Lansdale and his close relations in the Pentagon.

³²Williams to Lansdale, 9 May 1960, FRUS, 1958 - 1960, 1: 442.

³³Williams Interview, Tape 2, 77; also see Durbrow Interview, Tape I, 13. According to Williams, CINCPAC's reaction to Durbrow's move was for the General "not to pay any attention [to it]," see Williams Interview, Tape 2, 79.

CHAPTER IV

"THROWN TO THE DOGS"

General Williams's last year in Vietnam was characterized by true change in both the military and political situations. In 1959 the North Vietnamese government had completed consolidation of authority over the north to the point where it felt secure enough to begin a truly concerted effort to liberate the South. Following the Geneva Accords, the communists in North Vietnam had to settle an internal argument over whether to follow a "North Vietnam First" or "South Vietnam First" strategy. The "South Vietnam First" position was usually supported by those communists who had been born in the South and moved north following the Accords. Generally, these Southerners desired that a large scale military action be undertaken as soon as possible to retake their homeland. This desire was countered by the planning of those communists born in the North (including Ho Chi Minh and his main military leader, Vo Nguyen Giap) who felt that consolidation of communist control over the North must be completed first.' The task of consolidation necessitated the repression of dissent within North Vietnam. In one case, Giap was forced to shoot

North Vietnamese citizens in the city of Ho's birth during a 1956 riot over land reform.²

It was following the completion of North Vietnamese consolidation that Hanoi ordered the insurgency into the South to be increased. As the level of guerrilla activity climbed, the ARVN, GVN, and MAAG were all slow to realize the magnitude of the new communist threat. One reason for this delay in reacting was that in the six to eight months prior to this new effort it seemed that the Viet Cong had been dealt a heavy blow by the operations undertaken by the ARVN in 1958. This sentiment was not unwarranted however. As records would later show, the Viet Cong themselves felt that this had been a true dark period in their history.³ Yet the increased effort by the communists began to show results, as the change from sporadic attacks to a "sustained campaign of terrorism and military action" caused the South Vietnamese forces to suffer a number of reverses in the field.⁴ It was in response to this development that General Williams attempted to revise the training system to allow United States advisors closer access to actual field operations. Previously, the United States advisors were required to remain at the main ARVN headquarters while operations were undertaken and to rely on reports made by the ARVN units for evaluation, rather than gaining a firsthand view of how training was paying off.

General Williams's plan to allow closer advisor involvement was supported by the Commander in Chief, Pacific (CINCPAC), Admiral Harry D. Felt, "only if [the advisors] don't become involved in actual combat."⁵ The advisor request was approved by CINCPAC in early June 1959 and was put into the field immediately. Although there was concern on the part of Williams and his command, the public statements made during this period and up to January 1960 reflected the overall optimistic outlook of MAAG which still prevailed. For his part, General Williams viewed the increased incidents of insurgency of 1959 through 1960 as the last desperate effort of a dying guerrilla cause, and testified to that effect to the Senate Mansfield Committee in 1959.⁶

The optimism of 1959 was quickly replaced by the realism of the new guerrilla threat. This realism was painfully evident on 26 January 1960, during a Viet Cong raid on the town of Trang Sup, northeast of Saigon. After surprising the ARVN forces there, the Viet Cong made off with a large amount of weapons and ammunition, while inflicting sixty-six ARVN casualties. The attack caused great concern among South Vietnamese and MAAG officials, and its implications of the large scale Viet Cong activity to come "really put the Vietnamese in a tizzy."

Although General Williams reacted to the new threat with concern, he remained a staunch supporter of holding the ARVN out of pacification-type duties, preferring instead to concentrate on the support of internal security forces as the answer to the problem. Once again, the basic dispute over economic and political versus military concerns was raised within the country team. Ambassador Durbrow's reaction to the stepped-up insurgency was to blame the increase on disenchanted South Vietnamese citizens who were turning against an increasingly dictatorial Diem government, a government which at the time was still not emphasizing economic improvement programs to the ambassador's liking." Conversely, General Williams continued to back Diem and discounted Durbrow's estimation. The general felt that if the Vietnamese farmer was "secure from threat, [he] would live as he had for thousands of years in the past, content with his lot on the rice paddy. . . ." In the general's opinion, the insurgency would lose its momentum if the GVN forces, both ARVN and Civil Guard, were allowed to maintain a superior force in all parts of the country, and as a result, the South Vietnamese peasants would have no trouble in supporting Diem.

Another country team reaction to the stepped-up insurgency was a three-month study which concluded that "vigorous action was required," involving "total commitment

of two full divisions to internal security."¹⁰ Although General Williams agreed with the sentiment expressed by the study concerning the increased seriousness of the situation, he did not feel the situation had gotten out of control. Rather than removing troops from their training cycle, the general felt that many of the inefficiencies of the South Vietnamese forces could be overcome by a stricter adherence to the chain of command, and an end to political interference in the assignment of commands." He continued this belief in minor adjustments as the ingredient for success during the first half of 1960.

Although Williams also became concerned with the loss of weapons by ARVN units during engagements with the Viet Cong, even with these changes he failed to change his opinion of the situation in 1960. In the overall estimation, the general saw the new problems as a consequence of "not improper training, but a lack of training."¹¹ Although Williams's superiors seemed more concerned than the general in early 1960, they do not make nor do they order Williams to make any major adjustments in his program.¹²

The new situation in 1960 did not go unnoticed by Diem, however. Still having no success in arranging the control of the Civil Guard to his liking, he took steps of his own to address the insurgency. In February of 1960, Diem began

setting up a ranger type program for the ARVN forces without the consultation of General Williams. Although many of the general's detractors point to his strong disapproval of Diem's move as an indication of his lack of understanding of the insurgency, Williams believed that the Ranger groups were an overly complicated answer to a simple problem. The Ranger groups were to take the elite from many different South Vietnamese forces and train them for counter-insurgency fighting. From Williams's viewpoint, this would not only decapitate the units already in service by draining them of their best men, but also create a hybrid force which would perhaps be too sophisticated for its own benefit.¹⁴

Diem's idea of Ranger units in Vietnam was not new. The Diem government had made an attempt at setting up such a system based on a French model in 1958, a move which General Williams also strongly opposed. Although one interpretation of his attitude stated that his dislike of the program was related to his negative feelings over any program identified with the previous French regime, the general claimed he was more concerned with its effect on the regular troop training schedule than over any preconceived notions of guerrilla fighting.¹⁵

With his revival of the Ranger plan in 1960, Diem had raised the concern of American officials in Saigon as well as Washington. The consensus among United States military

leaders was that the commando school should be discouraged, because it would not only disrupt ARVN training, but also cause an unwarranted increase in the United States Vietnam Aid budget." After considering the alternatives, General Williams finally acquiesced, allowing some regular ARVN units to receive commando training, believing this would be preferable to permanently draining ARVN divisions of manpower by setting up of Ranger groups."

Diem's request for Ranger training raised much larger issues in Washington as well. Many in the United States government thought that Diem was using the request to mask a desire to increase his military strength over the approved limit of 150,000 men, with the United States footing the bill. This overall increase in American attention toward Vietnam was a turning point in the career of General Williams. As a result of more intense interest in the Southeast Asia area, many American leaders began to question why the situation in Vietnam was deteriorating, and why the previous years of United States military aid now seemed unsuccessful.

Durbrow's disenchantment with Diem continued in 1959, and so did Williams's support of the president. The infighting between the two country team members worsened as the last months of Williams's tenure neared. The ambassador had begun a policy described as "taking a club" to the

president, which was designed to force Diem to follow Durbrow's suggestions on economic and foreign policy.¹⁸ Durbrow believed that Diem was attempting to gain more United States aid for South Vietnam military projects in order to fund his own pet projects without USOM interference.¹⁹ An important event in this situation was the recall to Washington of both men at the end of July 1959 to face the Mansfield Committee, chaired by Senator Mike Mansfield of Montana.²⁰ This Senate committee was investigating allegations made by a Scripps-Howard Newspaper reporter in articles published from 20 to 25 July 1959. These articles had described the United States aid programs in South Vietnam as a "fiasco" and accused the United States groups in Vietnam of "waste and malfeasance."²¹ In response to a public outcry, the Subcommittee on State Department Organization and Public Affairs of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee requested the appearance of Durbrow, USOM director Arthur Z. Gardiner, and General Williams for their testimony on the matter.²² The committee found little if any evidence of the corruption purported by the author, although in its final report, the group was "critical of the economic aid program as compared to the military aid program . . ."²³ The ordeal of the hearings was not the same for all three men, however. The committee directed its harshest criticisms towards the director and the ambassador rather

than to General Williams, who received praise from Mansfield himself. As the general described it, "Neither Durbrow nor Gardiner were too happy with their experience before Mansfield."²⁴ The difference in the treatment of Williams and Durbrow served to widen the gulf between the two men.

During 1960, the ambassador joined many American officials in the growing concern over the increased guerrilla activity. Spurred on by his own dislike of Williams, Durbrow gradually began to point an accusing finger toward MAAG and General Williams. Durbrow received a visit in February 1960 from a State Department official who complained that the ARVN was not "being trained for the contingencies that United States estimates considered most likely."²⁵ After this meeting, Durbrow and the embassy began following a path described by General Williams as "back seat drivers without any responsibility . . . giv[ing] advice."²⁶ The ambassador stated in April of 1960 that

. . . it has been clear to me that for some time in the past, more attention should have been given to anti-guerrilla training. For various reasons which General Williams seems to believe are completely valid, not much of this training has been done. I personally have questioned [this policy] for almost a year. . . .²⁷

Thus, in 1960 a gradual questioning of the overall MAAG effort in Vietnam was taking place. As a consensus began to

take shape, the lack of anti-guerrilla training for the ARVN became a point of contention. At the heart of the matter was a desire to place the blame on someone for the success of the Viet Cong in 1960. Although General Williams was in some respect responsible for ARVN unpreparedness, he was also in a position to become a convenient scapegoat for United States policy failure. Williams was due to retire on 31 August 1960, and his departure would allow for a new approach to be undertaken by his successor, and blame for previous problems to be placed on the Williams's regime. The Saigon Embassy and the USOM quickly pounced on the opportunity to identify the MAAG and its military first ideas as faulty. This was a reflection of their desire of to gain support for their economic first direction by discrediting Williams's military first policy.

In his effort to paint Williams as the person responsible for ARVN unpreparedness, Durbrow investigated Williams's previous halting of the development of the first Ranger School in 1958.²⁸ The dislike between the two men was evident in the long memoranda fired off by each during this episode. To distance himself from responsibility for the situation, Durbrow stated to Williams on 19 April 1960 that "on the basis [of your June 1959] briefings . . . I understood that considerable efforts were made to give ARVN units fairly intensive guerrilla and anti-guerrilla

training."²⁹ Williams defended his previous moves in training with a twelve-page memorandum which attempted to answer Durbrow's charges, concluding with the suggestion that "if all military and security forces, as well as other means, were placed under a single capable military commander, who in turn was given full authority to conduct anti-Viet Cong operations, the capabilities of the RVNAF to more quickly destroy the Viet Cong would be enhanced."³⁰

Williams also retorted by complaining privately of Durbrow's seeming attempt to pursue ". . . a one man campaign to ruin Diem. . . ." In response to repeated scoldings by Durbrow over his refusal to make more economic progress, President Diem had requested a visit from General Williams's friend and confidant, General Edward Lansdale. This request was made ostensibly for the assistance Lansdale's anti-guerrilla background would give, but in the eyes of Durbrow, Williams and even Lansdale himself, Diem was looking for an ally in his battles with the ambassador. After much discussion in Washington and Saigon, Durbrow was successful in keeping Lansdale out of Vietnam in 1960.³² Lansdale was aware that Durbrow believed General Williams's training of the ARVN was faulty, and in correspondence between the two friends, Lansdale told the general that "You were set up [in Washington] to be the dumb military blunderer and Diem the next Syngman Rhee."³³

The friction between Durbrow and General Williams continued to the day of his retirement. When asked by Lansdale if he was planning on stopping in Washington for debriefing on his way to retirement in San Antonio, Williams referred to the fact that Durbrow was scheduled to be in Washington at that time, and stated:

I see nothing to be gained by anyone for me to come to Washington while Mr. D[urbrow] is there. As you say, the other team [State Department] is in the saddle, and will certainly attack anything I might say and they would win. They are too powerful . . . under such conditions, I see no reason why I should be thrown to the lions.³⁴

The question of just when Williams would retire had been in limbo beginning in 1958. The general was originally given a two-year assignment, and the general's successful training of the ARVN forces was certainly a main ingredient in his continuing beyond this period.³⁵ The question over Sam's retirement was complicated because he reached the mandatory retirement age in July 1958. The first attempt to bypass this requirement was made by the general himself when he requested that the date of birth on his birth certificate be changed from 25 July 1896 to 25 August 1897. Sam's request reflected the falsification of the document in 1917 which had allowed him to complete the Army officer training

school while still under the age of twenty-one.³⁶ The request caused some consternation within the Army, particularly with the Secretary of the Army, Wilbur Bruckner, as well as General Maxwell Taylor. Although there was much speculation as to Sam's motives for requesting the change, an inquiry over the matter was ended when it was discovered that Sam had made the same request in 1951, and both Bruckner and Taylor approved the change.³⁷

The second move to extend Williams's tenure in Vietnam was undertaken directly by President Diem, who requested that the general be allowed to stay on at MAAG until at least August 1960.³⁸ Diem's direct request to Washington was enough to override the obvious disapproval of the United States Ambassador and USOM in Saigon and complete General Williams's term at MAAG at five full years.

On 1 September 1960, the command of United States MAAG Saigon was officially transferred to Lieutenant General Lionel C. McGarr. As was the case with General Williams, the choice of McGarr was probably heavily influenced by General Maxwell Taylor; it would be the case with the next two overall United States Army commanders in Vietnam, Lieutenant General Paul D. Harkins and General William Westmoreland.³⁹

Ambassador Durbrow, whose tenure in Vietnam would continue until the Kennedy Administration recalled him in

spring 1961, made a special effort to gain the support of McGarr before his arrival in Saigon. While tolerating the last few months of Williams's tenure, Durbrow continually prodded the State Department to meet with McGarr and help him see the light of the embassy point of view before his assignment began.⁴⁰ As a result, cooperation between the embassy and the MAAG seemed to improve for the first few months of McGarr's tenure, but a gradual break did occur between the two groups beginning in 1961. McGarr was originally expected to be a strong-willed replacement in the mold of Williams." However, his "eccentric" tenure led to his reassignment after only eighteen months as Chief of MAAG, with his replacement by General Harkins at the helm of the newly formed Military Assistance Command - Vietnam (MACV) - in February 1962.⁴²

Upon his retirement, General Williams returned to the States and the Pentagon did not debrief him on his experiences until May 1961. Replaying his briefing before leaving for Vietnam, Williams was again taken into the "bowels of the Pentagon," where he received his first real taste of the new Democratic administration. General Maxwell Taylor, Admiral Arleigh Burkey, and the new young Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy interviewed Williams. Kennedy was investigating the Bay of Pigs debacle at the time. General Williams was given a desk of his own, where he was asked to

evaluate many general military contingency plans for different geographic locations around the world. Following the completion of this assignment, Robert Kennedy personally questioned the general concerning his Vietnam experience. According to Williams, Kennedy's summation of the session was that he had helped him "learn . . . more about Vietnam than [he] had since he had been . . . at the Pentagon."⁴³ Kennedy also stated "I've heard about you, and you're supposed to be a pretty hard person. How would you like to go to Vietnam as ambassador?" Williams's reply was that he was not a professional diplomat and that "they'd crucify me before I'd been there six months." Williams would later say that he did not feel that he was truly considered for the ambassadorship, but "[Kennedy] seemed to be a very nice fellow."⁴⁴

Following his departure from Vietnam, the general and his wife moved back to San Antonio, Texas, where he hoped to spend a relatively uneventful retirement. But Williams remained too concerned over events in South Vietnam to distance himself from the situation there. As a retired general, he attempted to keep current on the developments in the area. Initially, he received limited inside information from men within the MAAG who had served under him, but as these men transferred or retired, it seemed to Williams that he was purposely being "blacked out" by the McGarr regime.⁴⁵

During this period, another one of the general's main sources of information on the situation in South Vietnam was General Lansdale, with whom he shared many of the same views on the situation. Williams also kept in touch with Admiral Felix Stump, who was also in retirement, as well as with the "Friends of Vietnam," an influential Washington political group."

Following his return to the United States, General Williams gave special attention to any newspaper, magazine, or book reporting on the struggle in Vietnam, many times firing off letters to writers and editors whom he felt were giving incorrect information on the Southeast Asian situation. This letter writing campaign reached its highlight with the printing of a seven-page interview with the general conducted by U.S. News and World Report on 9 November 1964." The American people had become much more aware of Vietnam in 1964, and many questioned the past United States foreign policies in the region. In reaction to an article which described the general as well as the MAAG Saigon during the late 1950's in a negative light, Williams sent a ten-page letter of complaint to the editor of U. S. News and World Report. The general's effort to tell his side of the story paid off, as the editor agreed to interview Williams, and on 9 November 1964, an article entitled "Why U.S. is Losing in Vietnam - An Inside Story:

Interview With Former Chief U.S. Military Adviser, Lieut. Gen. Samuel T. Williams (Ret.)," appeared in the magazine.

The general also made speeches during this period to many civic and business groups describing his service in Vietnam, defending the actions which the United States had taken there. One incident which occurred in Vietnam following General Williams's retirement touched his heart deeply, the death of his friend President Diem during the coup of 1963, as the general mourned him. Of this action, Williams stated, "In my opinion, [the coup] was not only a mistake, but the most outstanding mistake in the international field since the debacle at the Bay of Pigs."⁸

In the later years of his retirement, Williams continued his fight against what he perceived as a misinformation campaign concerning Vietnam. Williams believed many false and misleading facts were being reported by the media in the United States. He warned in a speech in early 1964 that "the power of even a small segment of our PRESS is much greater than most realized. This POWER of a few editors (and their reporters) to influence National Policy has been recently demonstrated [in Vietnam]."⁹ For twenty-three years, the general continued to live in retirement in San Antonio, occasionally discussing the war and his role with military historians until his death on Friday, 27 April 1984, at the age of eighty-six.

ENDNOTES

¹Phillip B. Davidson, Vietnam at War - The History: 1946-1975 (Norvato, California: Presidio Press, 1988), 287.

²Ibid., 286.

³Spector, Advice, 326.

⁴Ibid., 329.

⁵Ibid., 332.

⁶Ibid., 334.

⁷Ibid., 338.

⁸"Evaluation of Situation in Vietnam: December 1957," FRUS, 1955 - 1957, 1: 872.

⁹Williams to Durbrow, 25 February 1960, Folder 77, Williams Papers, as cited in: Spector, Advice, 336.

¹⁰Ibid., 339.

¹¹Meyers to Ty, Saigon, 14 July 1958, FRUS, 1958-1960, 1: 64.

¹²Spector, Advice, 344.

¹³Both United States Army Commander Pacific General I. D. White and CINCPAC Admiral Felt stopped short of approving Diem's subsequent ranger force request, Spector, Advice, 350.

¹⁴Spector, Advice, 350. Williams stated: "A young ARVN commander has his hands full with his [regular] companies. . . . To plan for and control one or two additional and attached ranger companies complicates his planning and control and any mission given his command to execute," Memo, Williams for U.S. Ambassador, 1 Jun 60, sub: Training of the RVNAF, Folder 77, Williams Papers, as cited in: Spector, Advice, 350.

¹⁵Williams to Meyers, Saigon, 20 March 1960, FRUS, 1958 - 1960, 1: 343.

¹⁶Spector, Advice, 350.

¹⁷Ibid, 351.

¹⁸Lampert to Williams, Saigon, 9 May 1959, FRUS, 1958 - 1960, 1: 193.

¹⁹Durbrow to the Department of State, Saigon, 11 April 1959, FRUS, 1958 - 1960, 1: 181.

²⁰Editorial Note, FRUS, 1958 - 1960, 1: 289.

²¹Ibid.

²²Parsons to Secretary of State, Washington, 6 August 1959, FRUS, 1958 - 1960, 1: 225.

²³Editorial Note, FRUS, 1958 - 1960, 1: 289.

²⁴Williams Interview, Tape I, 94.

²⁵Editorial Note, FRUS, 1958 - 1960, 1: 293.

²⁶Williams to Lansdale, Saigon, 25 March 1960, FRUS, 1958 - 1960, 1: 348.

²⁷Durbrow to Parsons, Saigon, 19 April 1960, FRUS, 1958 - 1960, 1: 399.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Durbrow to Williams, Saigon, 19 April 1960, FRUS, 1958 - 1960, 1: 401.

³⁰Williams to Durbrow, Saigon, 6 June 1960, FRUS, 1958 - 1960, 1: 482.

³¹Williams to Lansdale, Saigon, 17 May 1960, FRUS, 1958 - 1960, 1: 464.

³²Durbrow to Department of State, Saigon, 17 May 1960, FRUS, 1958 - 1960, 1: 462.

³³Lansdale to Williams, Washington, 30 April 1960, FRUS, 1958 - 1960, 1: 426.

³⁴Lansdale to Williams, Washington, 21 June 1960, as cited in Footnote 8, FRUS, 1958 - 1960, 1: 502.

³⁵Williams Interview, Tape II, 85.

³⁶Meyers, Sam, 27.

³⁷Ibid., 28.

³⁸Letter from Durbrow to Parsons, Saigon, 10 March 1959, FRUS, 1958 - 1960, 1: 171.

³⁹Krepinevich, Army, 65, and phone conversation, Krepinevich with author.

⁴⁰Durbrow to Parsons, Saigon, 27 July 1960, FRUS, 1958 - 1960, 1: 524.

⁴¹Lansdale to Williams, Washington, 21 June 1960, FRUS, 1958 - 1960, 1: 501.

⁴²Krepinevich, Army, 56.

⁴³Williams Interview, Tape 2, 66.

⁴⁴Ibid., 67-68. General Maxwell Taylor subsequently became the next United States Ambassador to Vietnam.

⁴⁵Williams to Lansdale, 22 August 1961, Box 8, Personal Correspondence 1961, Williams Papers.

⁴⁶Felix Stump to Williams, 16 September 1964, Box 19, Miscellaneous Personal Correspondence, Williams Papers.

⁴⁷US News, 66.

⁴⁸Ibid., 71.

⁴⁹"Talk to SAR, Early 1964 on Vietnam", Box 7, Miscellaneous File, Williams Papers.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The tenure of Lieutenant General Samuel T. Williams in Vietnam could be viewed as a successful implementation of military aid by the United States, as well as a precursor of actions which would show this endeavor at its worst. With "Hanging Sam's" leadership, the armed forces of the Republic of Vietnam were transformed from a basically leaderless, poorly-trained, badly-equipped colonial force to what was considered by the United States Government and others as an independent, viable fighting army. Many obstacles were overcome along the way, not the least of which were the perceived constant threat of external aggression, as well as the delicate political nature of nation building, for both the fledgling South Vietnam nation as well as the United States.

With typical American optimism, the Military Advisory Assistance Group in Vietnam had originally set out to stop the seemingly immediate threat of a Korean-type invasion, and in the final estimation this goal was attained. Yet in retrospect, Williams's tenure in Vietnam has not been remembered as a success by many. Due to the increased communist insurgency, its effect on the stability of the

government of South Vietnam, and the ultimate necessity of United States' armed intervention in Southeast Asia, many point to Williams's lack of emphasis on anti-guerrilla training as the main feature of his command.

Although it would be convenient to place the blame for South Vietnam's lack of preparedness to counter the communist insurgency on General Williams, this hypothesis is not a valid one. Williams was not alone in failing to see the rising potential of the guerrilla offensive. It was not until 1960 that the United States government and the military began to give anything more than lip service to the notion of a truly urgent need for a strong anti-guerrilla force in South Vietnam. The possibility of an insurgency had been discussed previously, but the majority of United States planners had concentrated on the development of what has been labeled as the first Vietnamization plan.

Resembling the second Vietnamization attempt during the Nixon years, this first attempt was designed to stop communist expansion into South Vietnam without the use of United States armed forces if at all possible.' In the minds of United States military planners, the most probable reason for United States intervention was the threat of a massive invasion from the north. Thus, preventing this invasion became the top MAAG priority. Until 1960, Williams's record in this Vietnamization was basically

successful. It was as a result of the critical change in tactical direction by the communists that the flaws in the 1955 reasoning became evident.

Did Williams create a road bound South Vietnamese army? Considering the restraints of the TO&E system, he probably helped create a force with the greatest off-road capability possible. When asked in his retirement why he felt many who observed the ARVN in 1955-1960 viewed it as a road bound force, Williams replied:

. . . news reporters and others watching parades in Saigon would get the idea that the Vietnamese divisions were heavy with motorized equipment. . . . That was due . . . to the Vietnamese custom of putting into their parades all their road graders, bulldozers, tanks and other heavy equipment they could get their hands on. Apparently they thought this gave them the modern look they sought.²

Whatever the explanation, the fact remains that the American supplied, trained, and equipped ARVN forces truly had no choice but to resemble their United States counterparts in many areas. To prepare the ARVN for counter-insurgency was beyond the capability of the United States forces prior to 1960, as the subsequent changes necessary in the American forces themselves would later prove.

How did the relationship between General Williams and Ambassador Durbrow affect the United States aid mission? There is no question about the impact this rivalry had on the training of the Civil Guard. The argument over control of the Civil Guard was not resolved until 1961, when the ambassador and USOM finally acquiesced to the original desire of Williams and the MAAG by placing the internal security group under the control of the South Vietnamese Defense Ministry. If this move had been made earlier, perhaps the internal security forces might have provided the GVN with a firmer base from which to withstand the initial communist insurgency in 1959. Whether this change would have delayed the necessity of United States force involvement is unknown, but at the least it would have gained the GVN, ARVN, and MAAG more time to stabilize the security situation.

The disagreement between the civilian and military viewpoints of nation building were not limited to Williams and Durbrow, or even to Southeast Asia. However, the personal animosity between the two men exacerbated this disagreement, and was a powerful and unnecessary hinderance to the defense of Vietnam.

Was General Williams's judgment blinded by his relationship with President Diem? Critics of the general seem to infer that Diem manipulated Williams into allowing

the president to consolidate the military for the purposes of becoming a dictator.³ Although General Williams supported and defended Diem up to and after the death of the President in 1963, he was not without criticism for Diem. Williams straightforward style would not allow him to shy away from potential conflict with the president, and Williams did become concerned with the political dominance of the Can Lao Party in the military during 1960. There were many other occasions when the two men disagreed, but it is hard to believe that Diem blinded Williams. The general had vast experience in dealing with military and political leaders of other nations (German, French, Korean, Turks, Japanese, and many others). His entire career in the Army had stood against such action, although Williams would bend to Diem's will on occasion, usually in order to complete what the general believed was his task of training and supporting the South Vietnamese forces and government.

Can Williams's tenure in Vietnam be considered a failure? In the context of his original mandate, General Williams's tenure was a qualified success. Whether the communists ever truly considered a Korean-type conventional attack on South Vietnam between 1955 and 1960, the success of the MAAG in South Vietnam must be viewed as an important influence in North Vietnamese planning during this period. Although it is true that the insurgency ultimately led to

the placing of United States forces in Vietnam, the fact that the GVN had almost five years to build and stabilize cannot be overlooked, and the vastly increased deterrent of the improved ARVN forces was probably a principal ingredient in that development. As one author viewed it, during these years "history offered Diem a real chance."

Was Williams ignorant of the capabilities of guerrilla fighters? Although the general continually denied this accusation, in a broad sense he was guilty of this charge. Williams's main experiences with what were known as "anti-guerrilla" actions had taken place during the Korean War. These campaigns were little more than mopping up actions to gain control of isolated guerrilla groups. As Williams stated: "Communist guerrillas have been destroyed in Greece, Korea, the Philippines, and Iran. They can be destroyed in Vietnam."° And although the general was knowledgeable in many of the main concepts of anti-guerrilla warfare,° Williams reflected the beliefs of the United States Army itself, when he discounted the threat of guerrilla force.'

The attitude of the United States Army was evidenced by a lack of actual anti-guerrilla training in the late 1950s. The counter-guerrilla portion of Army training consisted of four hours of instruction to all troops.° Williams's lack of concern over insurgency was a reflection of the overall

Army lack of concern over the issue. Although lip service was paid to the threat in late the 1950s, the insurgency was basically viewed as an inconvenience by MAAG and American military planners alike.

Did Williams prepare the ARVN forces for the wrong war? When viewed from hindsight, this question is valid. But to place the blame on General Williams is to overlook the mandate of his command. Williams was chosen to train the army of an important anti-communist ally not only because of his previous success with Asian troops, but also because of his military demeanor. He was not sent to South Vietnam to create a friendly atmosphere within the country team or to placate the State Department. As he stated after retiring:

. . . when I was sent to South Vietnam in 1955 my [d]irective was . . . to organize, train, and equip a South Vietnamese army, navy, and air force; . . . [and] to support the regime of Ngo Dinh Diem. This [d]irective was not changed during my tour in Vietnam'

In following that mandate, it seems that at times Williams worked with blinders on, oblivious to anything which would distract him from his goal. This was typified by his statement in 1959 that " . . . I have left no doubts what my views are. In short, I am unalterably opposed to

diverting ARVN forces to perform any [activity] that does not advance their combat readiness."¹⁰

Williams proved his ability to train Asian troops for conventional warfare while in Korea, and this ability was probably a major reason for his choice as MAAG commander. Throughout his career he seemed to typify the tough, old army type of commander. Thus, it was no surprise that he held firmly to the old army ideas of conventional warfare during his years in Vietnam. But in following these ideas, Williams failed to show the ability to analyze the situation in Vietnam and adjust to the changing conditions. Because of this failure, his tenure in Vietnam could be considered less than successful.

In questioning General Williams's success, however, it is important to consider what his country and his superiors asked of him at that time. On 20 March 1959, Representative George Miller of California spoke of General Williams in the Congressional Record. Miller characterized the general as a man who:

brought to [Vietnam] his valuable combat experience, his sagacity for planning, his indomitable spirit and vigor. Side-by-side with the Vietnamese, he organized, he trained, he built, and he stayed on with the job and thus has struck a real blow for freedom."

Miller's comments were perhaps more reflective of America's

hope for Vietnam than the reality of the situation. General Williams followed what he believed were the orders of his superiors and the desire of his country in Vietnam, and on that count he cannot be faulted.

ENDNOTES

¹Spector, Advice, 377.

²U.S. News, 68.

³Durbrow to Parsons, Saigon, 27 July 1960, FRUS, 1: 524.

⁴Joseph Buttinger, Vietnam: A Political History (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1968), 433.

⁵Notes handed to President Diem by Gen. Williams, 28 December 1955, Williams Papers, as cited in Spector, Advice, 273.

⁶Ibid, 351. In September of 1958, MAAG had prepared and distributed a paper to the ARVN forces on "basic principles of anti-guerrilla operations." See "Paper Prepared by Williams, Saigon, 28 December 1955," FRUS, 1955 - 1957, 1: 606.

⁷Spector, Advice, 351.

⁸Ibid., 273.

⁹Williams to Durbrow, Saigon, 14 January 1959, FRUS, 1958 - 1960, 1: 133.

¹⁰Williams Interview, Tape 2, 85.

¹¹"Extension of Remarks of George P. Miller of California in the House, Friday, March 13, 1959," Congressional Record, Appendix, 20 March 1959, p. A2506, as quoted in Williams Interview, Tape I, 1.

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