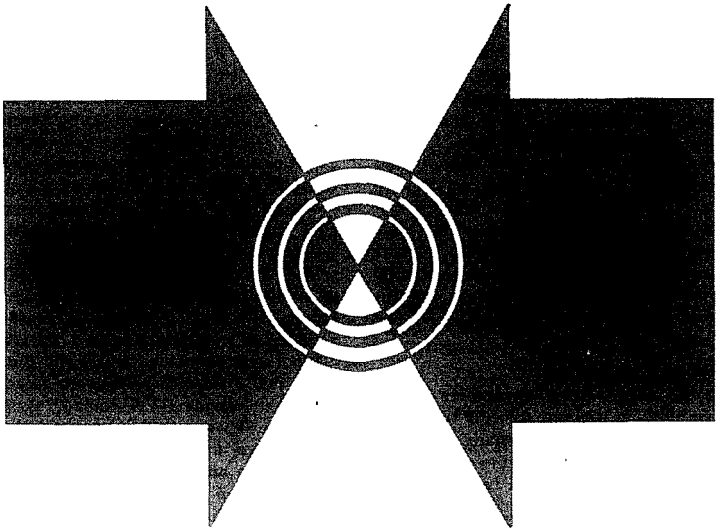

Bernard B. Fall

In our January issue Lieutenant Colonel William M. Hartness points out that the social and behavioral sciences can be of help in developing indicators of insurgency. One such list of indicators was developed by Dr. Fall in Vietnam in 1953. In the following article he updates his earlier work and proposes what he terms the "Fall Insurgency Nonmilitary Indicators (FINI)."—Editor.

AS EARLY as 1953 my field research in then French-held North Vietnam showed that the French criteria of "control" had no real meaning when it came to giving a factual picture of who owned what (or whom) throughout the Vietnamese countryside inside the French battleline, much less outside. The French confused linear mobility or military accessibility with control.

Let me explain these terms: "Linear mobility" consists in the ability to go from one point to another within a given zone. One could even give a numerical value to such mobility—100 for day and night, on foot, alone; 75 for daytime, armed, small group; 50 for daytime, with armor; to 5 for jet aircraft over 10,000 feet, but likely to be shot down by surface-to-air missiles—and assess varying point values to in-between situations.

"Military accessibility" could like-

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wise be defined by the ability to remain in a given area with what military potential; with 100, say, assigned to the single armed sentry and close to 0 to anything that requires mounting a division-size attack just to get in. Today, in South Vietnam, I would assign 95 to downtown Saigon, and much of Road 19 beyond An Khe to a few kilometers from Pleiku would qualify for 5 most of the time. But all this still does not tell us much about how effectively the government of Vietnam (GVN) administers the 15-odd million people who live in the country.

Meaning of Control

As a university student in Hanoi in 1953, it was not difficult to understand—from what my many Vietnamese fellow students told me—that there was a huge difference between what the French Army called control and what the population *felt* was control. For example, most of the students came from villages within the "controlled zone"—inside the fortified De Lattre Line—yet they always spoke of the Vietminh or Communist village chiefs in their home villages, often near a French or Vietnamese Army post.

It was then that I realized that taxation and schoolteacher assignments, as examples of existing government authority, might give me a picture of control that was totally different from that provided by the military to themselves from their own sources and, above all, by criteria set up by themselves. The map which emerged—after I had plotted teacher assignments and taxation noncompliance data on a map—was frighteningly different from that of the French Union Forces' situation map handed out at briefings.

The data adduced showed that out of a total of 5,780 villages in the Red River Delta area inside the De Lattre Line, 2,140 were under total Vietminh control and, therefore, militarily "inaccessible"; another 1,840 were accessible but outside GVN control; and, finally, 1,800—or 31.2 percent of the total—were under effective Franco-Vietnamese administration. It should be underlined that this was the situation prevailing one year before Dien Bien Phu (Figure 1).

Situation Described

The *Military Review* in October 1956 published both maps in an article in which I pointed out the often relevant difference between what is real and what is official.[1] The article described in detail a situation that can only be termed a carbon copy of what happened later in South Vietnam—insofar as something that precedes something else by a decade can be a copy. The article ended on the then totally unheeded warning:

Experience shows that a series of brush fires is harder to combat than one single major blaze—and one may be just as deadly as the other.

Although I did not realize it in 1956, I had stumbled across one of the essential verities of counterinsurgency in-

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[1] Bernard B. Fall, "Indochina—The Last Year of the War. Communist Organization and Tactics," *Military Review*, October 1956, pp 3-11.

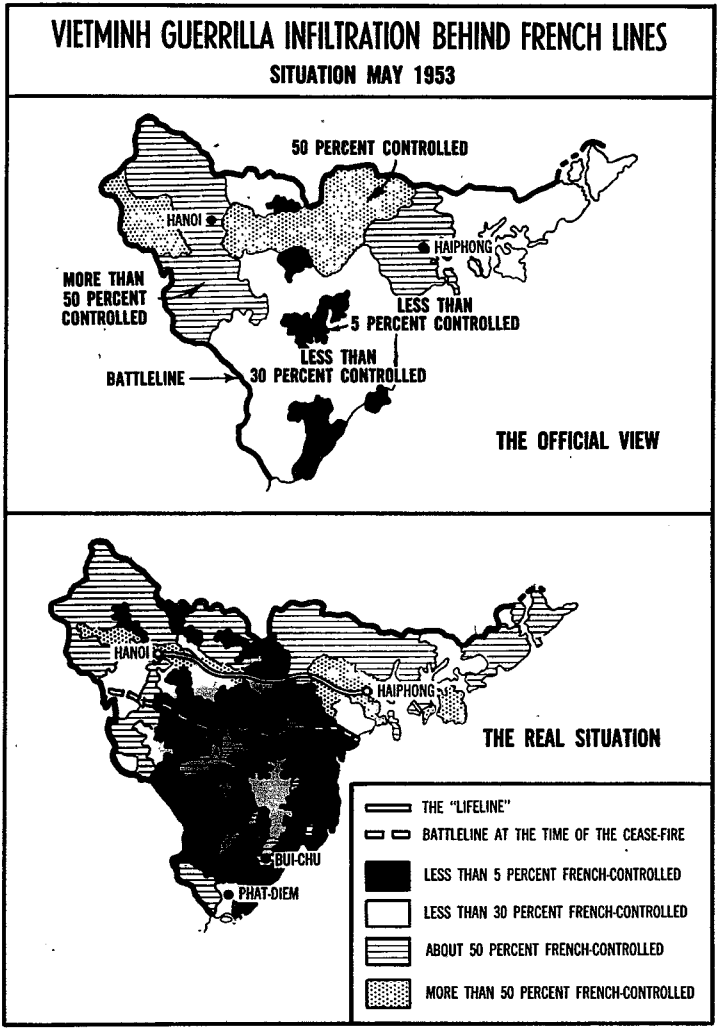
VIETMINH GUERRILLA INFILTRATION BEHIND FRENCH LINES
SITUATION MAY 1953
50 PERCENT CONTROLLED
HANOI
HAIPHONG
MORE THAN 50 PERCENT CONTROLLED
LESS THAN 5 PERCENT CONTROLLED
LESS THAN 30 PERCENT CONTROLLED
BATTLELINE
THE OFFICIAL VIEW
HANOI
HAIPHONG
THE REAL SITUATION
BUI-CHU
PHAT-DIEM
THE "LIFELINE"
BATTLELINE AT THE TIME OF THE CEASE-FIRE
LESS THAN 5 PERCENT FRENCH-CONTROLLED
LESS THAN 30 PERCENT FRENCH-CONTROLLED
ABOUT 50 PERCENT FRENCH-CONTROLLED
MORE THAN 50 PERCENT FRENCH-CONTROLLED

Figure 1.

telligence—conventional military factors are meaningless in that type of war. But one single experience was not enough to build a theorem—much less a theory. Events in South Vietnam were soon to provide, unfortunately, a second chance to verify the validity of my nonmilitary factors of insurgency.

Upon my return to South Vietnam in June 1957, it was obvious that much of South Vietnam was effectively under government control. But there were, beyond a doubt, some new danger spots. Since the cases were sufficiently isolated, the press in Saigon reported village chief killings as news items. No one apparently thought that such killings—even when repeated over a long time and vast areas—had any security significance.

New Indicator

Here, again, however, a new nonmilitary indicator came to my help, and soon the new picture emerged in full. It was at least as dangerous as that which had faced the French in North Vietnam four years earlier. In fact, it was more dangerous because the French were also involved in an overt war, whereas in South Vietnam in 1958 even the highest official observers clung to the myth of total peacefulness.

Upon my return to the United States I developed the results of my field research in an article entitled "South Vietnam's Internal Problems," in *Pacific Affairs*, September 1958. The relevant passage has kept its validity in full eight years later and bears quoting here.

There is a certain contradiction in the simultaneous assertions that there is peace and normal activity in the countryside of South Viet-Nam and in the justification of police-state measures because of the threat of internal subversion by still-existing Communist and sect guerrillas. This contradiction arises, however, mostly in the view of the Western observer. To the Vietnamese on the spot, the resurgence [2] *(rather than the continuance) of rebel activities has become a fact of life with which he has to cope on an increasing scale over the past twelve months. The extent and rise of this insecurity need not be explained in subjective terms which may be biased according to the particular viewpoint of the observer. It can be simply plotted, as in the accompanying maps for which daily newspapers or non-secret reports provide the basic raw material [Figure 2]. The left-hand map, showing the geographic distribution of Communist complaints to the International Supervisory and Control Commission (ISCC, or ICC) about alleged South Vietnamese violations of civil rights of 'Former Resistance Members,' is interesting* not because of the number of complaints but because of their location. *A perusal of the complaints (the writer has read them all) shows that they are sufficiently precise in their details to have been based upon information given to the Communist North Vietnamese authorities* by Viet-Minh agents who have remained behind in the South after the armistice or who have been infiltrated into the area since. *This is further confirmed when one compares these data with the right-hand map showing the actual location of recent rebel activities: all major areas of rebel activity also provide the major source of Communist complaints to the ISCC.* The conclusion is inescapable that there must be some coordination between the rebels

[2] Emphasis in original. All other emphases added.

and the North Vietnamese government.

As to the security situation throughout the Vietnamese countryside, it would be fallacious to compare, as most superficial observers do, the present state of security with that prevailing at the time of the battle of Dien Bien Phu, or in 1955, during the battle against the political-religious sects. Vietnamese in general consider the period between the proclamation of the Republic and the promulgation of the Constitution (October 1955-October 1956) to have been the high point in the regime's popularity and countrywide security. The precarious economic situation, however, is regarded a contributing factor in the present deterioration.

Guerrilla activities in South Viet-Nam during 1957 and 1958 no longer represent a last-ditch fight of dispersed sect or Communist rebel remnants. *On the contrary, they have taken on a pattern of their own which is quite different from that followed by the Viet-Minh during the struggle against the French. While the wartime Viet-Minh forces generally limited themselves to the intimidation of the local administrators (village chiefs, notables) into a state of 'positive neutrality,'* the new terrorists seek out the local police chiefs, security guards, village treasurers and youth leaders and kill them in as spectacular a manner as possible. *It would be pointless to describe here the hundreds of cases reported in detail in the Saigon press, but in general they can be said to have achieved the objective of the rebels —gradual 'insulation' of the central authorities from direct contact with the grass roots [and] serious interference with accurate reporting about*

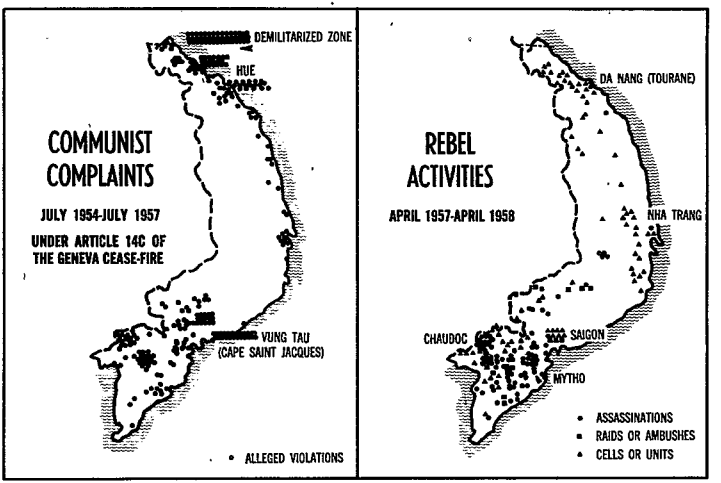

Figure 2.

the state of the population to the central authorities.

The nonmilitary insurgency indicators whose validity I had first discovered had proved correct. In 1959, as a result of a Southeast Asia Treaty Organization research grant, I was able to check on the progress of village-official killings. It was evident that what were soon to be called the Viet Cong (VC) now had taken administrative hold of a vast area within a small radius around Saigon, just as methodically as they had been subverting parts of the Mekong Delta two years earlier.

Finally, the US Operations Mission (USOM) in Vietnam, utilizing my techniques, came up with a map (Figure 3) covering the period March-May 1963, that it called "Viet Cong Fund-Raising Situation," and which, in fact, represents VC span of control in South Vietnam. In all but three minor provinces—and I doubt the validity of the report on those three—the VC "taxed" or, in other words, exercised a measure of administrative control. It is important to note that the map covers a period dating from before the Buddhist uprisings and the subsequent murder of Ngo-dinh-Diem. Country-wide, South Vietnamese taxation delinquency jumped from 44 percent in 1960 to 74 percent in 1964, according to a USOM report published in Saigon in July 1965.

Valid Conclusions

It is, therefore, possible to arrive at statistically valid conclusions as to whether an insurgency is developing and how it is going that are independent from the distorting effects of temporary military improvements. But in order to arrive at such conclusions, one must clearly understand that subversion has the same characteristics regardless of motivating ideology, providing the techniques are properly applied. Communism has invented nothing in Vietnam that Archbishop Mihail M. Makarios and his *EOKA* guerrillas could not use with the same effect in Cyprus and Ahmed Ben Bella and his *FLN* in Algeria. In one lapidary formula: When a country is being subverted, it is not being outfought or outgunned, but it is being outadministered—particularly at the village grassroots, where it counts.

While this law may by no means be as earth-shaking as the Van Allen belt or Einstein formula, I like to believe that the "Fall Insurgency Nonmilitary Indicators" (FINI) will have a certain importance not only in Vietnam, but in several other similar situations in many areas throughout the world.

Varied Indicators

The variety of such indicators is infinite and depends entirely on the particular society and its economic system. Here is another example from Vietnam. The main urban cooking fuel in Saigon is charcoal. Charcoal is largely produced in the kilns of the swampy Ca Mau Peninsula, and then shipped cityward by junks on the large South Vietnamese canal system. By 1960 Saigon charcoal prices began to skyrocket as the VC began to levy taxes on the charcoal junks, and, in fact, sank some of the recalcitrant ones *pour encourager les autres,* as the French used to say. To this day one can, up to a point, follow the fortunes of war in the 4th Corps area by the price of charcoal.

Another example was pork meat which comes from areas near rebel zones "C" and "D" north of Saigon. In 1961 Diem imposed pork meat rationing in Saigon as prices skyrocketed. Every little Vietnamese maid go-

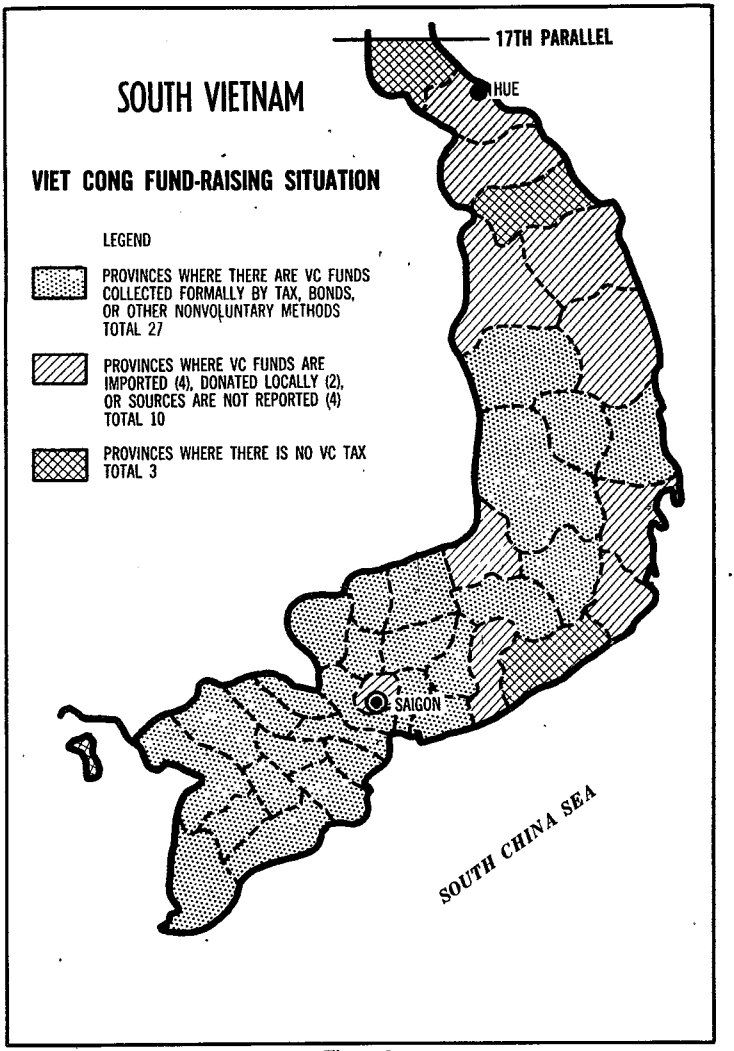
17TH PARALLEL
HUE
SOUTH VIETNAM
VIET CONG FUND-RAISING SITUATION
LEGEND
PROVINCES WHERE THERE ARE VC FUNDS COLLECTED FORMALLY BY TAX, BONDS, OR OTHER NONVOLUNTARY METHODS TOTAL 27
PROVINCES WHERE VC FUNDS ARE IMPORTED (4), DONATED LOCALLY (2), OR SOURCES ARE NOT REPORTED (4) TOTAL 10
PROVINCES WHERE THERE IS NO VC TAX TOTAL 3
SAIGON
SOUTH CHINA SEA

Figure 3.

ing to market knew better how the insurgency was doing than many of those nice gentlemen with their air-conditioned offices and glistening map overlays. Fresh salad in South Vietnam comes from the Da Lat area. Its price reached stratospheric heights when the VC started taxing the trucks along Road 20, and rose even higher when it began to be air transported.

Any country depends to some extent on internal trade, even if it lives to a large extent on foreign aid as Vietnam does. Any unaccounted-for distortion in normal trade patterns may be due to the fact that a part of that country is entering the ominous "pre-combat" phase of insurgency, or already finds itself in the midst of it. Indeed, as Colonel Hartness suggests, only social scientists solidly grounded in the society under observation can come up with the proper items or factors which should be included in the establishment of FINI's for that country.

Chance for Error

In the case of the FINI's as in the application of any numerical indicator to a complicated phenomenon, there are excellent chances for committing serious errors. And the closer one comes to purely military factors, the greater the errors are likely to be. Take, for instance, the now-famous "incident counts," in an imaginary province, along with an imaginary population control chart (Figure 4).

There is no doubt but that the incident count appears to show an encouraging "pacification" trend. The only question is: *whose?* There is a decreasing number of incidents both in an area about to be totally held by government forces—or about to be totally conceded to the enemy. In fact, the population control chart could depict the same province, of course—and again for both sides. It could picture a vast progovernment improvement, or it could depict a governmental situation picture in its last throes, with the bulk of the population of the area sitting in a tight Dunkirk-like perimeter around the last friendly strongpoint in the area. Hanoi never had as many

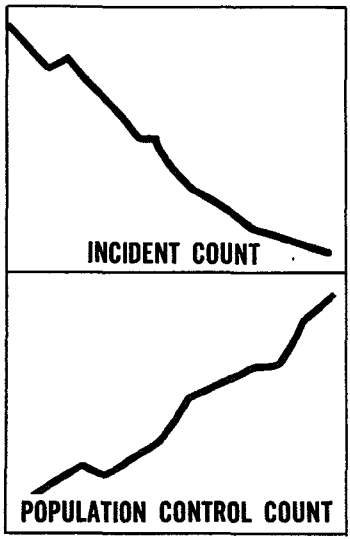

Figure 4.

people under French control as it did two weeks before the 1954 cease-fire, with 400,000 Catholic refugees fleeing headlong toward it from Namdinh and the southern part of the Red River Delta that was about to be evacuated by French troops.

In other cases—particularly in year-end nationwide surveys—it is important to determine whether the net increase in controlled population is not simply the product of the national

birth rate: with nine million out of 15.4 million under GVN control and an almost three percent birth rate, it is possible to increase the size of the controlled population by 270,000 per year even without trying.

Another problem in arriving at the proper construction of a correct country FINI model is the establishment of what constitutes normalcy for that particular country or society. After all, what may be an abnormally high murder rate for Western Europe might be a rough presidential election somewhere else. South Vietnam—even when the VC did not exist—was faced with four Hoa Hao rebel sect battalions, which could not just be wished off the map. It would, therefore, be a total illusion to believe that South Vietnam—or Guatemala, or the Congo—can be turned into American normalcy. It is important, then, to know or to establish what I would like to call a "minimal acceptable background incident rate" which could then become at least one facet of the over-all objective to be reached by the counterinsurgent forces.

What I have attempted to show is that there are no simple approaches to gauging the extent of a present or potential insurgency problem. I also have, hopefully, shown that it was possible, even a decade ago, to come up with fairly reliable indicators which were superior to other means of assessing a maturing insurgency situation.

I do not, of course, dismiss altogether the old reliables of the various intelligence estimates, but I am inclined to think little good of those attempts at depicting the undepictable, which are the so-called "kill counts," "weapons counts," "structure counts," and other substitutes for the nonexisting battlelines of revolutionary warfare. Their specific weight in any overall estimate should be minimal, as they are easily falsifiable by overzealous subordinates. It is harder to fake salad or charcoal prices than captured-weapons reports.

But above all, good commonsense, even if not translatable into punchcard symbols, should not be left out of the picture. The fact that the American Indians statistically could not win against the United States did not prevent General George A. Custer's command from being annihilated.

In the last analysis, however—and having entered the caveat that an accurate FINI model must be made by solidly grounded social scientists—the counterinsurgency operator must still remember that "there are lies, d . . . . d lies, and statistics." And the Fall Insurgency Nonmilitary Indicators in all probability do not escape that rule.