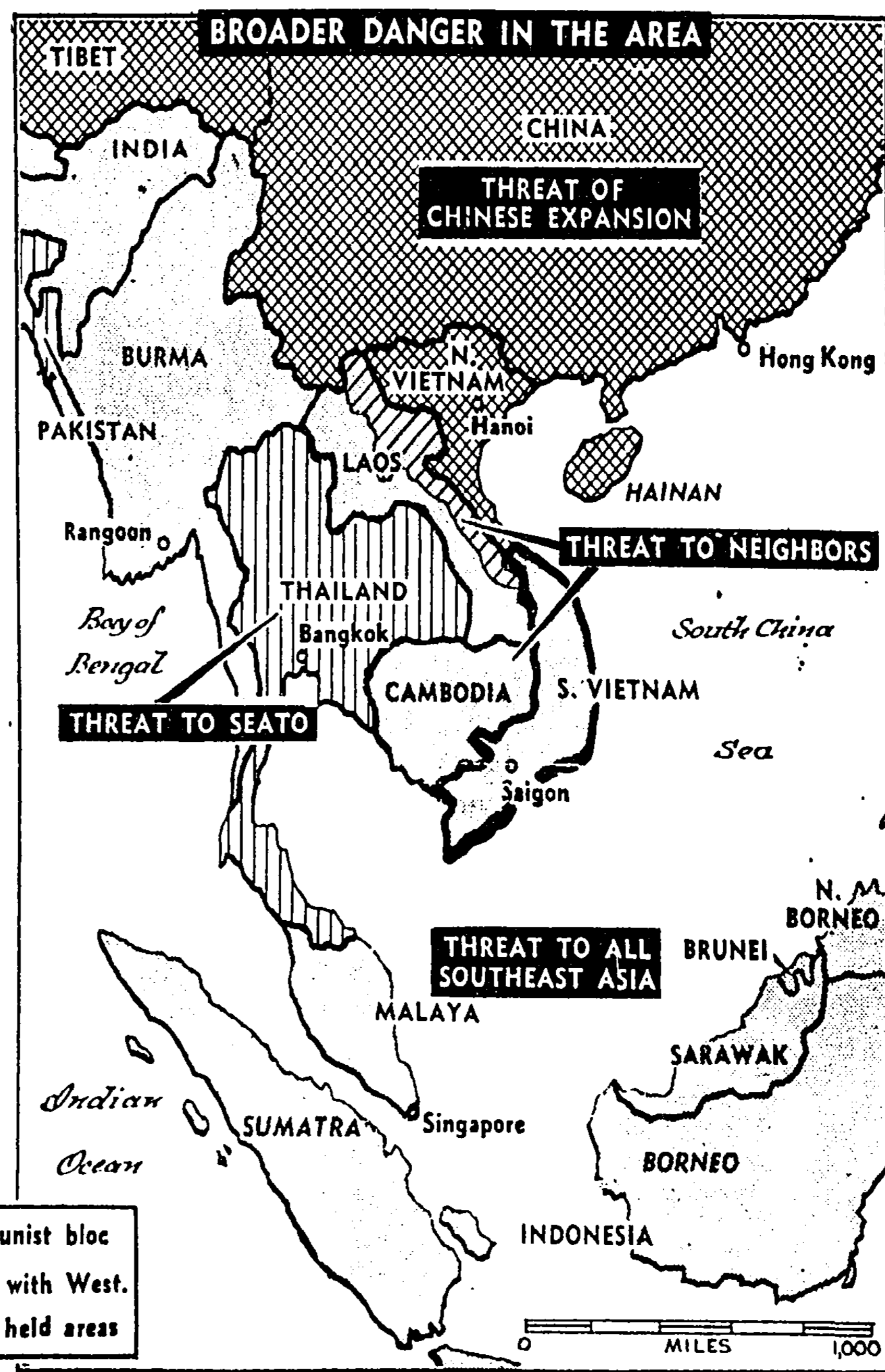
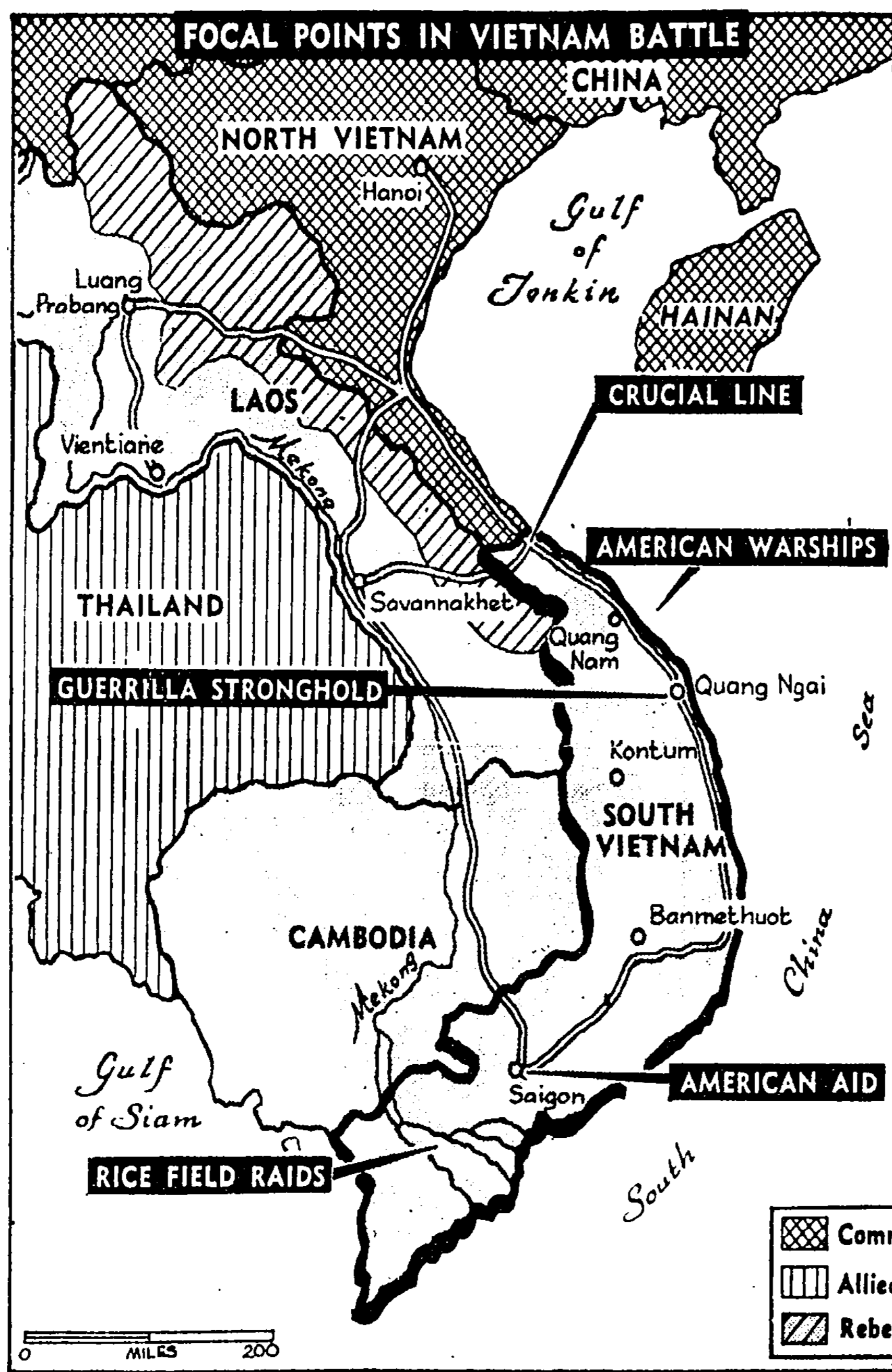




Tank crew on guard near northern border. U.S.I.A.



South Vietnamese soldiers on jungle patrol. Chappelle from Palmer Agency

A 'VERY REAL WAR' IN VIETNAM—AND THE DEEP U.S. COMMITMENT

By HOMER BIGART
Special to The New York Times

SAIGON, Feb. 24—The United States is involved in a war in Vietnam. American troops will stay until victory.

That is what Attorney General Robert Kennedy said here last week. He called it "war" in a very real sense of the word. He said that President Kennedy had pledged that the United States would stand by South Vietnam's President Ngo Dinh Diem "until we win."

At the moment the war isn't going badly for "our" side. There is a lull in Viet Cong activities, and the South Vietnamese forces are both expanding and shaping up better as a fighting force. But all that is needed to precipitate a major war is for the Chinese Communists and Communist North Vietnam to react to a build-up of American forces.

American support to Vietnam has always been based on the fear that Communist control of this country would jeopardize all Southeast Asia. And it continues despite the fact that Diem's American critics—especially liberals repelled by the dictatorial aspects of his regime—have been predicting his imminent downfall.

Diem remains firmly in charge and Washington's support for his regime today seems more passionate and inflexible than ever.

U. S. Involvement

Actually the United States has been deeply involved in the fate of Vietnam since 1949 when the decision was made to subsidize the continuation of French rule against the Communist Viet Minh rebellion. The first United States Military Assistance Advisory Group (M. A. A. G.) arrived in 1951 to supervise the distribution of supplies. Thereafter the United States played an increasingly important role. To use a favorite Washington term, aid was "escalated" until today \$2 billion has been sunk into Vietnam with no end to the outlay in sight.

This may sound more reckless than the best brinkmanship of John Foster Dulles' days, and perhaps it is. But the United States is on this particular faraway brink because the Kennedy Administration seems convinced that the Communists won't rise to the challenge of the American presence and assistance.

Forces and Strategy

The battle in Vietnam currently involves some 300,000 armed South Vietnamese and 3,000 American servicemen on one side, against 18,000 to 25,000 Viet Cong Communist regulars operating as guerrillas.

The battle that is being fought is complex—in the nature of the fighting, in the internal political background and in its international implications.

The United States does not have any combat infantry troops in Vietnam as of now, but we are getting ready for that possibility. Marine Corps officers have completed ground reconnaissance in the central Vietnam highlands, a potential theater of large-scale action between American troops and Communist forces coming down from the north.

American combat troops are not likely to be thrown into Vietnam unless Communist North Vietnam moves across the seventeenth parallel or pushes large forces down through Laos into South Vietnam.

In that case the United States would have to move in fast. Forty miles below the frontier with North Vietnam and parallel to it is Highway 9. This road has high strategic importance. Not only is it one of the few adequate roads open across the mountains to the

American Prestige Is Staked on Keeping the Communists From Taking Over in a Critical Area Where the Battle Is Complex and Difficult

and against two frontier forts recently evacuated by the Vietnamese Army.

So far our contribution in blood has been small. One American sergeant has been killed by enemy action and another is missing and presumed captured. Inevitably our casualties will grow.

It has not been easy to change from conventional warfare, in which the Vietnamese were trained so many years by M. A. A. G., to unconventional counter-guerrilla warfare. Under French influence, the Vietnamese had developed two tendencies difficult to erase: first, the habit of staying inside forts designed for the troops' protection rather than for the security of the populace; second, the habit of good living—a leisurely lunch followed by a siesta.

Hard-Living

But counter-guerrilla warfare demands hard living. Troops must live in the jungle just as the guerrillas do and eschew the comforts of barracks life.

There are some minor difficulties: most Vietnamese recruits are from the densely populated lowlands—rice paddy boys who have a fear of the jungles, not merely fear of snakes and tigers but fear of getting lost. They move fearfully, with the instinct of a herd, tending to bunch up and thus present fat targets for a Viet Cong ambush.

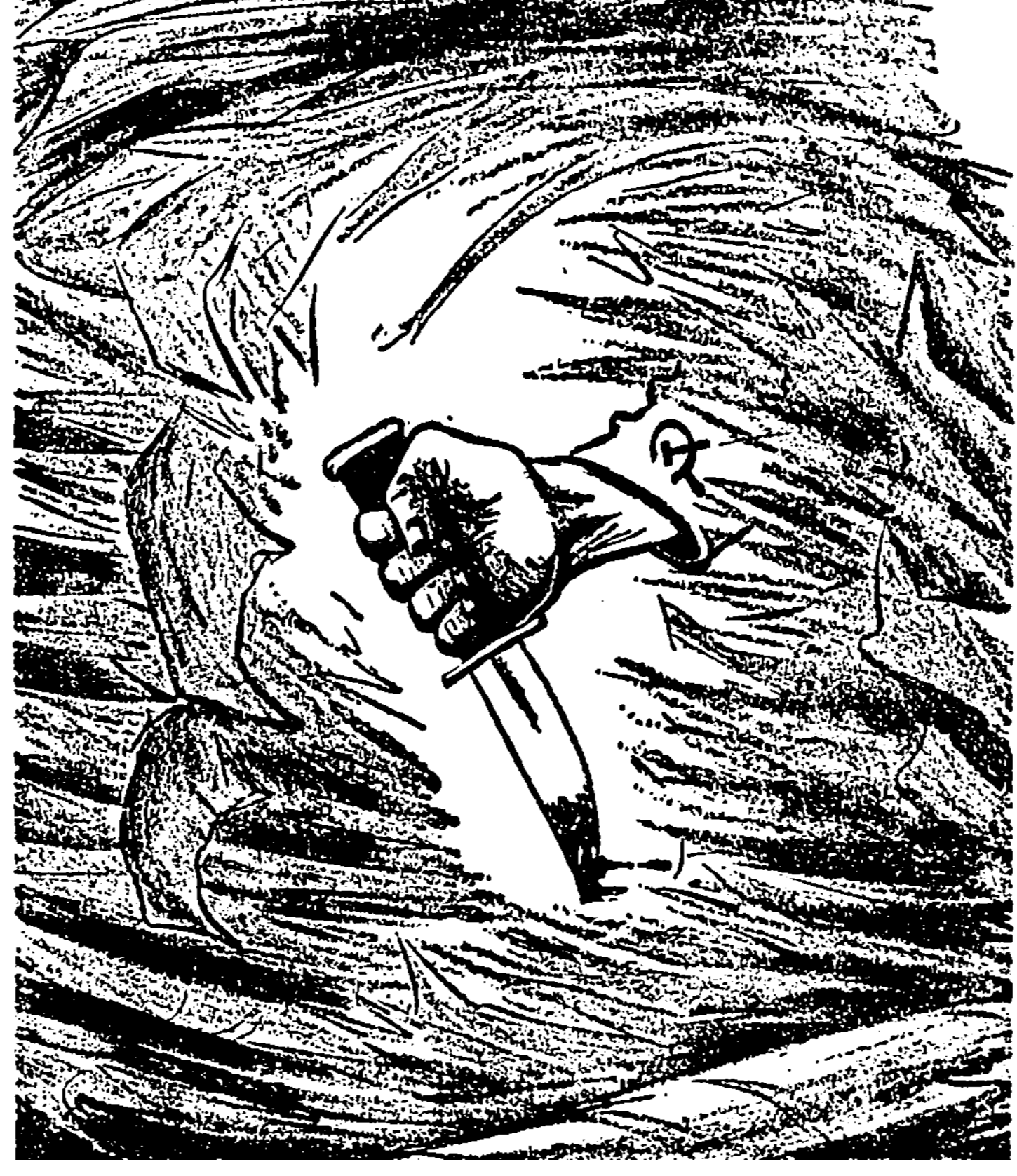
The Viet Cong guerrillas also were former rice paddy boys, but they became inured to hardship by on-the-job training in the jungle. Further, the Vietnamese are somewhat smaller than Americans, so they get weary toting eleven-pound M1 rifles and pine for the lighter French weapons they were formerly equipped with.

At a higher level, United States advisors, besides trying to eliminate political manipulation of troops, are attempting to dissuade the Vietnamese from launching large-scale operations

President Diem

The man who is at the center of the Vietnamese effort and who is also a center of controversy—President Diem—is something of an enigma. He is a mandarin (an aristocrat) and a devout Catholic. So there are two strikes against him at the start, for mandarins were regarded by the masses as greedy and corrupt, and Catholics as an unpopular minority.

Diem, however, has proved incorruptible. Rumors of per-



Stampone in The Air Force Times

"Atmosphere in South Vietnam."

based on sketchy intelligence. They see no justification for such operations until a more adequate intelligence system is developed and greater tactical mobility achieved.

Intelligence will improve only when the Government is able to break the grip of fear with which the Viet Cong muzzles the rural population. Greater mobility is being provided by American helicopter companies, but this is a costly and dangerous way to move troops.

Diem, a 66-year-old bachelor, often has been accused of withdrawing inside his narrow family clique and divorcing himself from reality. Critics say he distrusts everyone except the family and takes advice only from his brothers, particularly Ngo Dinh Nhu, his political advisor. His brother Nhu and his attractive, influential wife, are leaders, according to critics, of a palace camarilla which tries to isolate the President from the people.

As commander-in-chief of the armed forces, Diem keeps close tabs on military operations. His forces are ready to take over the defense of villages, railroads, harbors, airports, provin-

cial capitals and so on, the when the Government troops arrive, sentiment shifts to the static defense duties that it will Government." But generally the village people would settle for the Government side, he said, not because they admired the Government but because they wanted peace.

Consequently the Government has a great advantage. He estimated that of the 30 per cent tenting to the Viet Cong, only a third were hard-core, another third would adhere to the Communists under adversity, while the remaining third would break off under pressure.

Freedom from dictatorship and freedom from foreign domination are major propaganda lines for the Viet Cong. Americans in uniform have now been seen by the peasants in virtually all sections of the country. This has given the Communists a chance to raise the bogey of foreign military domination.

Denied Request

More recently the United States resisted Diem's urgent requests for aid in creation of the civil guard and self-defense corps. The United States insisted that a 19,000-man regular army was all Diem needed for national defense. Diem went ahead and organized the two forces, arming them with antiquated French rifles. Finally, after alarm bells were ringing to the widespread revival of Communist guerrilla activity and vast sections of the countryside were lost to the Viet Cong, the Americans conceded Diem's point. Last year the United States started training and equipping the civil guard.

It is now generally agreed that the civil guard and the self-defense corps are absolutely vital. For until these reserve forces are ready to take over the defense of villages, railroads, harbors, airports, provin-

he was shocked by the loss of support among the people in the past two years. He blamed this on the fact that Government seemed to grope from crisis to crisis without a clear policy: "It's just anti-Communist and not pro anything."

But another qualified observer, perhaps less biased, cautioned against underrating Diem. Increased guerrilla activity had not been matched, he said, by a corresponding rise in popular discontent and this failure to respond must have depressed the Communists.

Most villages, he added, were like a leaf in the wind: "When the Viet Cong enters, the population turns pro-Communist."

Together with the forces of the allies, the United States overseas forces provide deterrent insurance, as do the home-based intercontinental bombers and missiles of the Strategic Air Command.

The U. S. is seeking to galvanize local governments into greater defense efforts. But fundamentally, it is still United States military power that is expected to have meaning for Communist aggressors.

Thus, the Kennedy Administration increased its commitment in South Vietnam in an effort to prevent a Communist takeover in that country.



Yates in The San Diego Union "Sky hook."

Problems and Prospects

The lack of trained troops to keep the Viet Cong under relentless pressure probably will continue to handicap the military command throughout 1962, because at least a year must elapse before the self-defense units will be really capable of defending their villages.

Whether because the Army is beginning to take the initiative and is penetrating secret areas of Viet Cong concentrations or because the Viet Cong has abated its activities in order to recruit and train, the fact remains that security seems better in most parts of Vietnam.

In peaceful, booming Saigon there is much speculation on how the Viet Cong will react to an American build-up. Senior American officers have been studying an enemy guide book to guerrilla warfare searching avidly for clues, as though this modest work were the Viet Cong's "Mein Kampf."

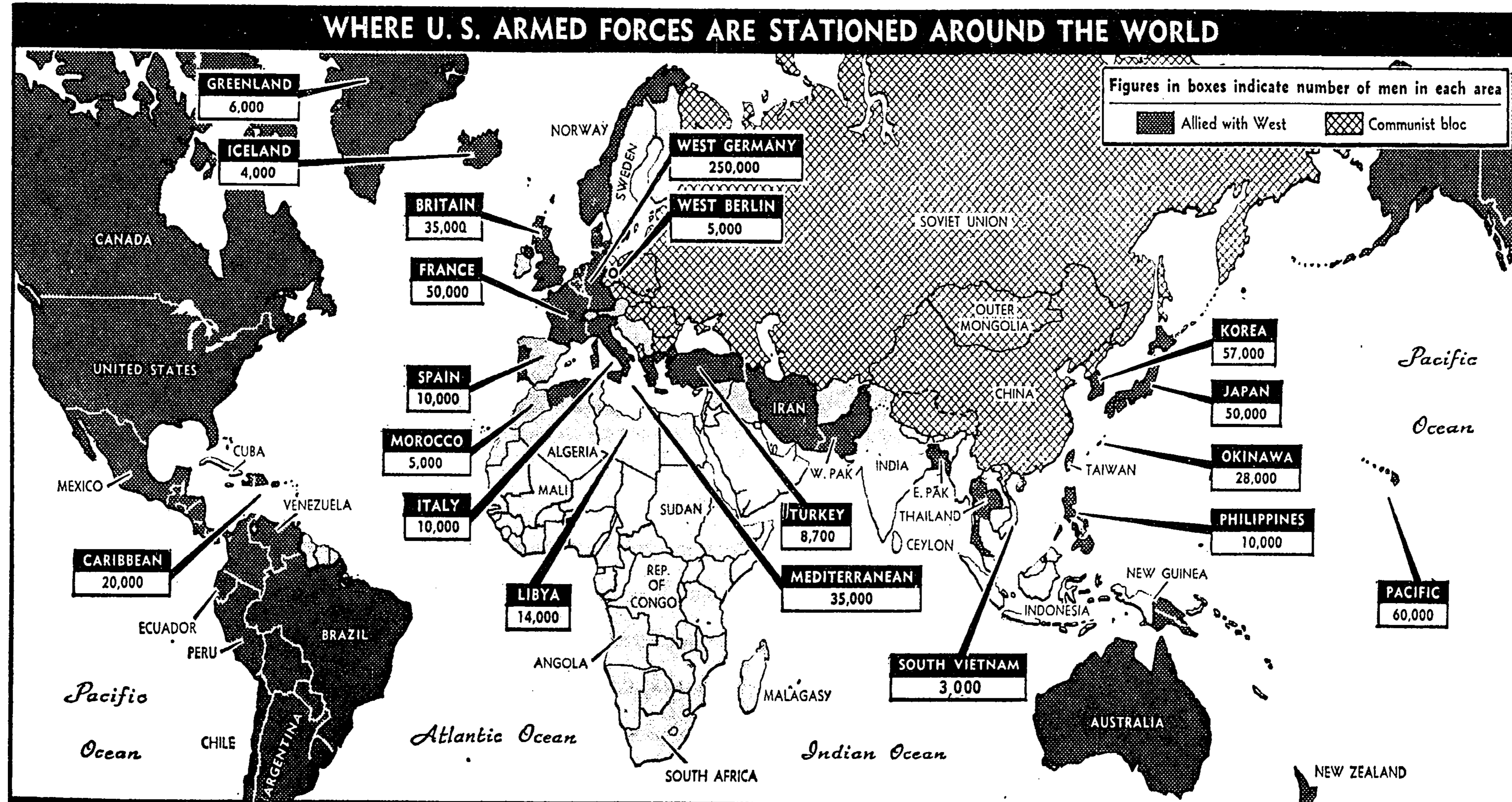
There will never be enough troops to seal off the frontiers. There aren't even enough troops to ring Viet Cong enclaves near Saigon. Not before summer, when the civil guard and self-defense units are slated to take over the burden of defending their villages will enough troops be freed for a counter-guerrilla offensive. Then, instead of a conventional steppe offensive of limited duration, a counter-guerrilla drive will seek to keep Viet Cong units on the run at all times, tire them out by constant pressure and force them into less hospitable country where food supplies are scarce.

The offensive cannot succeed unless the Government is able to mobilize positive popular support. This will be difficult, for the Government is just beginning to develop grass roots political cadres.

Need Modification

Meanwhile something more than narrowly anti-Communist goals must be offered Saigon intellectuals, who are now scorned by both Diem and the Americans. This group may be permanently alienated unless there is promise of democratic reforms. Without pressure from Washington, there is not likely to be any relaxation of Diem's personal dictatorship. The struggle will go on at least ten years, in the opinion of some observers, and severely test American patience.

The United States seems inextricably committed to a long, inconclusive war. The Communists can prolong it for years. Even without large-scale intervention from the north, which would lead to "another Korea," what may be achieved at best is only restoration of a tolerable security similar to that achieved in Malaya after years of fighting. But it is too late to disengage; our prestige has been committed. Washington says we will stay until the finish.



In addition to those in South Vietnam the U. S. has large forces positioned in many areas of the world. The forces represent U. S. recognition that the security of the U. S. is linked to the security of virtually all free nations against various forms of aggression. The overseas forces increase and complicate the problem that the Communists would have if they planned a surprise attack. The likelihood is small that all of these bases could be eradicated in a single strike.

In addition, they constitute a formidable, strategically placed retaliatory force against any attack short of all-out nuclear strike.

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