

"A Strategy of Terror," in *A Collision of Cultures*

A truck carrying twenty teen-age girls of the Republican Youth Corps from a Saigon celebration is ambushed, nine of the girls killed in the attack.

A hamlet chief unsympathetic to the Vietcong is publicly disemboweled and then, while he is still alive, his eyes are punctured by the point of a bayonet.

VC troops blast a South Vietnamese Ranger post with mortars and automatic-weapons fire, then move forward behind a shield of peasant children. The Rangers then warn them to stop, but as the Communists continue to advance they open fire, killing ten children and wounding sixteen more.

One night a VC unit overruns a small garrison, killing the defenders and mutilating their bodies. The corpses are loaded into a sampan, along with surviving widows and children, and floated down a canal. In the morning light peasants along the waterway can just make out the slogan on the sampan's side: "Don't get in the way of the National Liberation Front or the same will happen to you."

The terrorism practiced by the Vietcong against the civilian population of South Vietnam took every conceivable form: harassment, kidnap[p]ing, assassination, execution, and massacre. VC terrorists mortared refugee camps, mined village roads, and hurled grenades into crowded city streets. Between 1957 and 1965 an estimated 5,800 government officials were murdered and nearly 10,000 more abducted for varying lengths of time. Ordinary peasants and city dwellers fell victim to terror at even greater rates. The war that U.S. combat troops encountered when they first arrived . . . already contained an element of ferocity that few Americans could readily comprehend.

Some of the bloodletting was wholly indiscriminate but much of it was part of a calculated campaign of fear and intimidation. Initially a means of advertising the presence of the NLF, it became the insurgents' primary vehicle to power in the countryside. Striking at individuals of authority—hamlet chiefs, religious figures, schoolteachers--the VC eliminated virtually an entire class of Vietnamese villagers. In the process they isolated the peasants from the government that had promised them protection, leaving them only three alternatives: active support of the VC, passive neutrality, or death.

. . . . Urban terrorism reached stunning proportions during the Tet offensive in 1968 when VC and NVA troops methodically eliminated thousands of civil servants, police officers, educators, and religious figures during the twenty-six-day occupation of Hue. . . .

. . . By 1969 nearly 250 civilians were being murdered or kidnap[p]ed each week. Meanwhile, as support from the peasantry grew less voluntary, the VC removed the velvet glove from its iron fist, launching full-scale attacks against villages and hamlets.

[in a 1967 attack on Montagnard villagers in Dak Son, they used Russian flame throwers, machine guns, mortars, and rocket fire to destroy homes, asphyxiating many.] Forcing 160 survivors from their bunkers, the VC shot 60 of them to death on the spot, then marched the rest off into the jungle. . . . All told, 252 unarmed Montagnards, most of them women and children, had been killed and 50 wounded, 100 kidnap[p]ed, and another 450 missing.

. . . . Communist terror grew more intense as the war went on and was largely directed at civilians without connection to the government. . . . The VC strategy of terror. . . was a systematic, deliberate attack on the civilians of South Vietnam resulting in the death or injury of tens of thousands of noncombatants.

. . . . The cruelty of the Vietcong toward the peasants reinforced the mistaken belief [by American soldiers] that life was cheap in the countryside. At the same time the inability of the peasants to defend themselves contributed to the contempt with which some GIs regarded them. Their refusal to risk their lives and those of their families by informing on the Vietcong helped nurture the idea that they were themselves the enemy.