

Ngo Dinh Nhu and the “Strategic Hamlets” Policy in the South of Vietnam from 1961 to 1963

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Abstract

Ngo Dinh Nhu was a Vietnamese politician during the Cold War. He is considered a great strategist of the Republic of Vietnam with the position of “political advisor” to President Ngo Dinh Diem. Since 1961, he has implemented the strategic hamlet policy in the South of Vietnam with support and aid from the US government and military. The strategic hamlet that Ngo Dinh Nhu established was actually part of the “special war” plan that the United States used in Vietnam. Strategic hamlet with a focus on defeating the communists in the South of Vietnam and building the rural economy. However, during its implementation, it encountered major barriers and contained many contradictions. This policy failed with the fall of Ngo Dinh Diem's regime in 1963. This study deals with Ngo Dinh Nhu and the strategic hamlet policy in South Vietnam during the period from 1961 to 1963, thereby clarifying his role in this policy.

Keywords: *Ngo Dinh Nhu, strategic hamlet, South of Vietnam, Republic of Vietnam*

INTRODUCTION

During the Vietnam War from 1961 to 1975, US intervention played an important role in establishing the government of the Republic of Vietnam. This war took place over a long period of time with different forms and methods of warfare, in which the period from 1961 to 1965 was associated with the implementation of the strategic hamlet policy of "Special War". During the early stages of the war, Ngo Dinh Nhu emerged as a prominent politician, playing a major role in planning the policies of the Republic of Vietnam. From the end of 1961, he began building strategic hamlets with support from the United States to repel the victory of the communists in the South of Vietnam. These contents have been mentioned in many studies in Vietnam such as studies by Tran Van Giau, Ha Minh Hong, Pham Duc Thuan, Le Cung, Tran Thi Thu Huong, Nguyen Cong Thuc. Strategic hamlets are a rural war policy that took place in the South of Vietnam from 1961 to 1963 (continuing until the following years with different names). The goal of this policy is nothing other than defeating communism, something that the Republic of Vietnam and the United States are very afraid of. However, the implementation process and the limitations it brought created a crisis-filled South Vietnam. The disintegration of this system contributed significantly to the collapse of the Republic of Vietnam regime, marking the complete political failure of Ngo Dinh Nhu in the political arena of South Vietnam at the end of 1963.

This research aims to clarify the historical figure Ngo Dinh Nhu, the strategic hamlet and his role in the implementation of these policies. Thereby clarifying an important content of the history of the Vietnam War.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Vietnam War is a research topic that has received a lot of attention, especially strategic hamlets in the South of Vietnam. Studies that have mentioned strategic hamlets from a policy and practical implementation perspective include Osborne, M. E. (2018). *Strategic Hamlets in South Vietnam: A Survey and Comparison* and Prentice, L. E. (1969). *Vietnam's strategic hamlet: development and denouement*. In their research works, Miller (2013) with *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam* and Miller, Goscha, Ostermann (2009) with *The Diplomacy of Personalism: Civilization, Culture, and the Cold War in the Foreign Policy of Ngo Dinh Diem* portrayed this policy under the leadership of Ngo Dinh Diem and Ngo Dinh Nhu. These studies also confirm the almost absolute role of US support for this policy. Besides, important research works of Ahern Jr (1993),

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Busch (2002) with *Killing the Vietcong: The British Advisory Mission and the Strategic Hamlet Program*, Thompson (2001) with *Ngo Dinh Nhu as the primary cause of United States involvement in the 1963 coup in South Vietnam*, Lovering (2017) with *Sir Robert Thompson's Better War: The British Advisory Mission and the South Vietnamese Strategic Hamlet Program, 1961-1963*. These are three research works that mentioned important figures who created this policy in South Vietnam such as Ngo Dinh Nhu and Sir Thompson.

In Vietnam, the authors are Giau (1964) with *The South Maintaining a Bulwark: A Brief History of the Southern Compatriots in the Struggle Against the Americans and their Lackeys*, Huong (2003), *Vietnam Labor Party led the fight against the “national policy” of strategic hamlets of the US - Republic of Vietnam in South Vietnam (1961 - 1965)*, Thuc (2006) *Movement against the destruction of Strategic Hamlets 1963-1964* has There are profound studies of Communist reactions to this policy.

These studies have clearly shown the implementation methods to combat strategic hamlets. These studies have clarified the important contents of the strategic hamlet policy, it has shown the importance of this policy in the Vietnam War. And in this article, we clarify some of the content related to this policy with the person who is almost considered its "father", Ngo Dinh Nhu.

METHODOLOGY

In this research article, we use the historical documentary method, which helps us obtain historical documents about Ngo Dinh Nhu and the strategic hamlet to better clarify the research content. The method of historical analysis has also been applied in evaluating historical issues. Besides, using the historical research method of international relations also helps us have more reasonable analysis of the relationship between the Republic of Vietnam and the United States.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Ngo Dinh Nhu and the establishment of the Republic of Vietnam

Ngo Dinh Nhu is a famous Vietnamese politician, he was born into a Catholic family, his father was a mandarin in the Nguyen court during the colonial period. He had older brothers, Ngo Dinh Khoi and Ngo Dinh Diem, and Ngo Dinh Thuc, all of whom were prominent figures in Vietnamese history in the early twentieth century.

In 1935, Ngo Dinh Nhu was the first Vietnamese person to pass the entrance exam to the French National School of Chartes (French National School of Ancient Literature). Here, Ngo Dinh Nhu came into contact with the personalism of Emmanuel Mouier (1905-1950), a French idealist philosopher. Ngo Dinh Nhu asked “Nhan vi”.

In general, Ngo Dinh Nhu had early exposure to Western civilization and was influenced by Western bourgeois democratic ideology. At the same time, coming from a family of high-ranking officials of the colonial-feudal regime, gave Ngo Dinh Nhu an "anti-Communist" tendency. This ideology greatly influenced his later political career.

In 1938, returning to Vietnam with two degrees in Archives - Ancient Literature and a bachelor of science, Ngo Dinh Nhu was accepted to work at the Indochina Archives and Library Department. Ngo Dinh Nhu's ability was demonstrated in his collaboration with Paul Boudet in researching and bringing archival documents to display and exhibition.

In 1942, with outstanding ability, Ngo Dinh Nhu was promoted to establish the Trung Ky Archives and Library in Hue to reorganize documents of the Nguyen Dynasty.

By 1945, the August Revolution in Vietnam took place, overthrowing the rule of French colonialists and Japanese fascists. On September 8, 1945, Minister of Home Affairs Vo Nguyen Giap of the new Government appointed Ngo Dinh Nhu as Director of the National Library and Document Archive Center. However, Ngo Dinh Nhu quickly left this position and quickly entered political activities with his brother Ngo Dinh Diem.

In June 1954, before the Geneva Agreement on ending the war and restoring peace in Vietnam was signed, Ngo Dinh Diem was brought by the US to Saigon to become Prime Minister of the “National Government of

Vietnam". At this time, the United States disregarded the Geneva Accords and supported Ngo Dinh Diem to eliminate French influence and establish the Republic of Vietnam.

Ngo Dinh Nhu founded two organizations "Can Lao Nhan Vi Party" and "National Revolutionary Movement" (Miller, 2013). The Central Executive Committee of the "Can Lao Nhan Vi Party" has members: Tran Trung Dung, Nguyen Tang Nguyen, Ly Trung Dung, Ha Duc Minh, Tran Quoc Buu, Vo Nhu Nguyen, Le Van Dong, Ngo Dinh Nhu are founder and supreme leader of this Party. In the government of the Republic of Vietnam, Ngo Dinh Nhu held the position of "Political Advisor" to President Ngo Dinh Diem (Miller, & Ostermann, 2009).

Ngo Dinh Nhu directly participated in drafting the Constitution, he held almost all power in his hands. As a "political advisor" next to President Ngo Dinh Diem, Ngo Dinh Nhu has become the brain of the regime, the birthplace and control of all national strategies (Jacobs, 2006).

Since 1961, Ngo Dinh Nhu, with the support of the United States, has launched a policy widely *applied in rural southern Vietnam, which is "Strategic Hamlet"*.

US intervention and strategic hamlet policy

The "Dong Khoi" movement (1959 - 1960) launched by Vietnamese communists mobilized millions of South Vietnamese people to participate, causing the Ngo Dinh Diem government to fall into crisis.

In early 1961, J.F. Kennedy became President of the United States and approved a new global military strategy called "flexible response" that advocated conducting "limited war" to easily win wars. The war that the United States chooses, limited war, is divided into two types: "Special War" and "Local War".

From 1961 - 1965, the US applied the "Special War" strategy to South Vietnam to extinguish the revolutionary movement of the communists and save the Ngo Dinh Diem - Ngo Dinh Nhu government.

To implement this strategy, the US - Saigon Government advocates:

Increasing advice and aid, since 1954, the MAAG advisory mission of 342 people was increased by 350 officers. From February 8, 1962, the MAAG organization changed to MCAV with General Paul Harkins as Commander, no. American military advisors increased rapidly from 1,077 in 1960 to 22,000 in 1963 and in 1964 to 26,200.

Expands the authority of the military advisory and aid mission, including authority to advise and provide support to local security forces.

Increase the regular army of the Republic of Vietnam Army to 200,000, including the establishment of 2 more Infantry Divisions, develop more air force and navy to be able to pacify and control the border and boundary lines. waters. The Army of the Republic of Vietnam quickly increased from 136,000 troops (1960) to 196,357 troops (1963), the air force 5,817 troops (1963), the navy 6,595 troops (1963)... with increasingly modern weapons and equipment due to receiving Large source of aid from the United States (Ahern Jr, 1993)..

The special war strategy conducted in the South began with the implementation of the Staley - Taylor plan, according to which this plan was divided into 3 phases (Busch, 2002):

Phase 1: Is the most basic phase of the plan, aiming to pacify South Vietnam in 18 months (June 1961 to the end of 1962) by many measures, the most important being gathering people to set up "strategic hamlets" (target of 16,000 strategic hamlets established). Parallel to the establishment of the "Strategic Hamlet" were support operations of military forces led by the US army.

Phase 2: In 1963, we will continue to complete the pacification program, increase aid to the Army of the Republic of Vietnam and continue to sabotage the North of Vietnam.

Phase 3: During the two years 1964 - 1965, the goals of the "Special War" will be completed, shifting the focus to economic development.

The US - Saigon government hopes that with the "Special War" strategy, the main content of which is the Staley - Taylor plan will gradually defeat the communists in South Vietnam. In essence, the implementation of the

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Staley-Taylor plan was a deep intervention by the US in South Vietnam, with the intention of "fighting quickly, winning quickly", pacifying the South of Vietnam in 18 months (from June 1961 to December 1962).

The United States and Ngo Dinh Diem, Ngo Dinh Nhu believes that the above plan is completely capable of winning, with that plan to gradually withdraw American troops home by the end of 1962 and the counter-insurgency war will end successfully in late 1965.

On September 17, 1961, R.Thompson and the BRIAM mission were invited to Saigon after being very successful in the war to pacify rural areas in Malaysia and the Philippines. According to R.Thompson: *“The strategic intention of the United States from 1960 onwards was to keep South Vietnam, restrain (communist) China and prevent the communist wave from spreading to Southeast Asia”* (Lovering, 2017).

R. Thompson admits: *“In Malaya, the uprising was mainly pro-communist Chinese with about 600 villages, including more than half a million people... and in Vietnam, the uprising spread to all rural areas”*. Besides, Ngo Dinh Nhu also referred to centralized agricultural models such as Israel's Kibbutz. After receiving opinions from British and American experts led by R. Thompson, Ngo Dinh Nhu embarked on plans to build strategic hamlets (Lovering, 2017).

In the Outline of the Strategic Hamlet National Policy compiled by Ngo Dinh Nhu, the purpose and implementation method of this national policy is clearly stated: *“The Republic of Vietnam has created a solution to on the one hand bring the country out of underdevelopment, and on the other hand still practice true democracy. That solution is strategic hamlets; strategic hamlets are a policy of country, taking hamlets as the basis to ensure security and order, and covering all political, military, economic and social plans. If tactics win a battle, strategy wins the war. Strategic hamlets according to that concept will help us win the current war with communism. That strategic significance covers three areas: military, political, economic and social... The “national policy” of strategic hamlets is a long-term and important strategy of the Republic of Vietnam. It is also the nation's responsibility before history, requiring new citizens, new officers, and new soldiers. This national policy has clearly and effectively concretized the “Nhan vi” policy of the Republic of Vietnam with the purpose of: Restoring security in the countryside and implementing democracy...”* (Thuan, 2017). Strategic hamlets are considered a typical model of the anti-Communist strategy, so the United States and the Republic of Vietnam have focused resources to deploy this apparatus at all levels from the government to local authorities.

In Official Dispatch No. 07682-BNV/CTI8M of the Republic of Vietnam dated December 15, 1961 on the use of the noun “strategic hamlet” it was defined: *“The noun “strategic hamlet” includes many aspects: military, political, economic, social, cultural. The people in the hamlet oppose division, slow progress, anti-communism, and absorb new civilization. The role of “strategic hamlets” is to make people aware of their own protection and unify the will and build the nation”* (Thuan, 2017).

On February 3, 1962, President Ngo Dinh Diem signed Decree No. 11-TTP establishing the agency “Inter-Ministry Committee in charge of Strategic Hamlets”. On April 19, 1962, the National Assembly of the Republic of Vietnam passed Resolution No. 1214-CT/LP on Supporting the National Policy of Strategic Hamlets and Comprehensive Support of the Strategic Hamlets Strategy of the Ngo Dinh Diem Government, from Accordingly, the strategic hamlets' policies were quickly deployed throughout South Vietnam and became national policy. Le Xuan Nhuan, an officer who directly established strategic hamlets at that time, commented: *“President Ngo Dinh Diem, especially advisor Ngo Dinh Nhu, although officially announced in 1962, quietly began to strategic hamlet since the end of 1961, and considered it a national policy, a key tool of ideology and prestige of the Republic of Vietnam...”* (Lovering, 2017). Regarding the funding source to implement the strategic hamlet national policy, Minister Nguyen Ba Can: *“The strategic hamlet budget is a completely cash budget from US aid. In addition, the United States provides support from barbed wire, iron stakes, cement, flour, sugar,... hundreds of items worth millions of dollars”* (Thuan, 2017). Statistics table below:

Table 1. Statistics on budget for construction of strategic hamlets in 1962 - 1963

Vietnam Dong (VND)

Funding source	Amount of money
National Budget (fiscal 1961 – 1962)	100,000,000 VND
Private organizations voluntarily contribute:	44,716,192 VND
US aid (fiscal 1961 – 1962):	730,000,000 VND
National Budget (fiscal 1962 - 1963)	300,000,000 VND

Funds granted to the Binh Minh and Hai Yen campaigns	58,353,470 VND.
Australian aid:	40,000,000 VND
German aid	131,250,000 VND
Total	1,404,439,662 VND

Source: Inter-ministerial Committee in charge of strategic hamlets (1963), *Situation of strategic hamlet construction until mid-October 1963*, National Archives Center II, City. Ho Chi Minh, 116.

Table 2: Summary of the work of establishing strategic hamlets until mid-April 1963

Total number people	14,076,336 people
Projected ACL number	11,287 hamlets
complete	6,151 hamlets (54.5%)
Number people Satisfied enter hamlet	8,190,010 people (58.5%)
presently	2,172 hamlets (19%)
Number people in progress enter hamlet	1,607,154 hamlets (11.5%)

Source: Ministry of Public Works and Transportation – Republic of Vietnam (1963), *number 45 sessions meeting April 19, 1963 returned Hamlet Strategy*, National Archives Center II, City. Ho Chi Minh, 311

As a national policy, the “Inter-ministerial Committee in charge of strategic hamlets” was established headed by Ngo Dinh Nhu with members including Ministers in Ngo Dinh Diem's government and the police force. The USOM agency established by the United States has an important position in the role of financial and policy advisor. In 1961 - 1962, the United States and the Republic of Vietnam decided to take Vinh Long province (Southwest of South Vietnam) and Quang Ngai province (Central Vietnam) as experiments for the strategic hamlet establishment program and from there replicated throughout the South of Vietnam.

In the report Research Memorandum From the Deputy Director of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research (Denney) to the Acting Secretary of State wrote (Office of the Historial, 1963):

Aims and Objectives: The basic purpose of the strategic hamlet program is to achieve the widest possible popular response to the government's counterinsurgency effort by providing the peasants with an increasing degree of physical security from Communist intimidation and by enacting social, economic, and political reforms meaningful to the peasants in the context of their own traditions and expectations. It should be noted that in a country such as Vietnam, which has emerged only recently from almost a hundred years of colonial rule and where popular concepts of government have long been locally rather than nationally oriented, the very fact that a national government would seek to serve and protect the citizenry might itself be considered revolutionary.

What is the Strategic Hamlet?

Although the village formally constitutes the lowest local administrative unit in Vietnam, each village actually consists of several almost self-sustaining settlements or hamlets of varying size, frequently scattered over an appreciable distance. (There are some 2,500 villages in Vietnam, while hamlets number about 14,000.) In an insurgency situation, this distribution pattern very obviously poses major problems for maintaining security and defense and would normally require an extraordinarily large police, security, and military force merely to maintain a presence, much less engage in effective operations. The strategic hamlet approach, therefore, replaces the soldier or policeman with the part-time “civilian volunteer,” or in the American tradition, the “minuteman.” The strategic hamlet is essentially a fortified hamlet, as shown in Attachment A, a sketch. Generally, only hamlets in relatively insecure areas or fairly close to Communist strongholds are selected for fortification. Peasant huts removed from the hamlet concentration pattern are brought closer to the center of the pattern, thus limiting the, distance involved in the regroupment. A fence of bamboo and barbed wire is built around the entire hamlet, and a ditch or moat is dug around the fence; the ditch or moat, in turn, is encircled by an earthen mound. The area immediately around the village is cleared to permit fields of fire and to avoid giving guerrillas and terrorists hiding places close to the hamlet.

Inside the hamlets, the government has taken increasing measures to improve the general lot of the peasant. It has established permanent dispensaries or sent in medical teams, where once modern medical attention was unknown; it has established or rebuilt schools, formerly non-existent or destroyed by the Communists; it has built market places where farmers can bring their produce in order to encourage business; and new roads, wells, and a number of community development projects have been started. Agricultural credit and fertilizer have

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been provided to the farmer, and agricultural technicians have come to help the farmer improve production. For example, loans by the National Agricultural Credit Office to peasant farmers and repayments of these loans have risen sharply since the beginning of 1963; farmers in strategic hamlets have received more than 50% by value of these loans. In 10 central provinces alone, the government is distributing more than 19,000 tons of fertilizer which will be in time for this season’s planting.

On the political side, the government has drawn up “communal charters” for the hamlets, legalized and developed a formal administrative structure heretofore lacking or very rudimentary, and has accelerated a training program for hamlet officials. Election of these officials by secret ballot, provided by law, has actually begun in many provinces and will be extended to all hamlets. These officials in turn vote for village officials; village elections have also started and are expected to take place in more than half of the 2,500 villages within the next few months.

Tran Van Giau wrote: *“The scale of making strategic hamlets is so large, but each strategic hamlet is small. The United States and the government of Ngo Dinh Diem learned from the experience of setting up large “Khu Tru mat”, most of the farmers in them were forced to leave their homes, gardens and migrate,... so the policy of “Khu Tru mat” and “Dinh Dien” were previously strongly opposed by farmers. Strategic hamlets are small “dense zones” but are implemented on a large scale and with more extreme measures. Each strategic hamlet is surrounded by bamboo fences, trenches, mines, barbed wire and blockhouses... very strictly”* (Giau, 1964).

Ngo Dinh Nhu's role in the Strategic Hamlet

Ngo Dinh Nhu was the architect of the strategic hamlet policy of the Republic of Vietnam: facing the challenges that the communists caused in South Vietnam after 1960, Ngo Dinh Nhu quickly realized that the problem is control over the countryside. This control would limit the influence of communist armies in South Vietnam and could establish order in the countryside [8]. With the advice of the BRIAM group, headed by R. Thompson, they have recently been very successful in their campaign to establish “new villages” in Malaya. Ngo Dinh Nhu quickly established experimental “strategic hamlets” in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. Initial success with the support of the CIA and US aid prompted him to decide to replicate the “strategic hamlets” model throughout South Vietnam with the ambition of 16,000 strategic hamlets (Prentice, 1969). When establishing the Inter-Ministerial Committee in charge of strategic hamlets, Ngo Dinh Nhu was the supreme leader of this Committee. Documents at National Archives Center 4 show that he consulted the Israel Kibbutz model to make the strategic hamlet more economic than military. As a thinker, Ngo Dinh Nhu brought the dream of the “Can Lao Nhan Vi” theory to the strategic hamlet. He always believed that when successful, the countryside of Southern Vietnam would change greatly. From overthrowing the communist army, he also created the basis for great changes in the countryside during the Republic of Vietnam. Do Mau commented on this mistake of the strategic hamlet policy as follows: *“In terms of geography and culture, the fields in the South of Vietnam are vast. Agricultural land in the South of Vietnam The South is fertile, so people love freedom. Therefore, gathering them in a remote hamlet with fences, trenches, bunkers, and sentries is anti-psychological”* (Thuan, 2017).

The Republic of Vietnam also forced them to leave the place where they were born, their ancestors' graves, the familiar scene in which they grew up, which was no different from depriving them of their precious soul. Reality shows that his ambitions are too great, they cannot replace the strategic hamlet's fundamental weaknesses of being too dependent on US support. The lack of reasonableness in implementation and especially the unpopularity of southern Vietnamese farmers, people who love freedom and liberality (Thuc, 2006).

Ngo Dinh Nhu considered strategic hamlets to be a vital policy of the Republic of Vietnam: As a very powerful political advisor to the Republic of Vietnam, Ngo Dinh Nhu boldly implemented this policy in a negative direction. He always believes that quick establishment, coercion, and control are effective measures to quickly achieve desired targets. Immigration is inherently a very important issue for the strategic hamlet, but it has not been carefully calculated (Thompson, 2001). Corruption in implementation or haste in implementation has made strategic hamlets not only unstable in construction but also lacking in people's support for this policy. In fact, when the rural areas of Southern Vietnam were unstable in the implementation of strategic hamlets, Ngo Dinh Nhu had no effective measures to save the situation. The Buddhist events in South Vietnam in 1963 and the crises in rural South Vietnam were the two main reasons why he and Ngo Dinh Diem were overthrown and killed

(Huong, 2003). His death marked the end of the strategic hamlet policy; the leaders of the Republic of Vietnam then sought to replace the name strategic hamlet with other names to replace the name associated with Ngo Dinh Nhu because they wanted to reduce people's anger with this policy.

CONCLUSION

The Vietnam War is an important content of modern world history. During that war, Ngo Dinh Nhu and the strategic hamlet contained many historical issues that needed research and discussion. Ngo Dinh Nhu was the person who proposed the strategic ap policy and implemented it in the South of Vietnam with the support of the United States. Although this policy took place in a short time, it caused great disturbances in Vietnam and was strongly opposed by southern farmers. This was followed by an attack by the communist army on strategic hamlets. Although the strategic purposes stated in the theory of strategic hamlets are good, many shortcomings have arisen in the implementation process. Ngo Dinh Nhu has made efforts to implement the strategic hamlet policy, but the impacts it brings to the Republic of Vietnam are not really good. While this policy was still being implemented, Ngo Dinh Nhu and his brother Ngo Dinh Diem were couped and overthrown. The departure of brothers Ngo Dinh Diem and Ngo Dinh Nhu led to the collapse of the strategic hamlet policy. The crises in the South of Vietnam continued from late 1963 to 1965 until the US military directly participated in the war in Vietnam. At this time, the war no longer took place in the southern countryside of Vietnam but became a large-scale war throughout Indochina.

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