

Making Trouble **by C. Robert Dickerman**

Bob Dickerman served as an FSO with USIA from 1962-1992, and was with the Joint U.S. Public Affairs Office in My Tho and Moc Hoa, Vietnam from 1965-1967.

Although it was of course denied then, everyone accepts now—including the late Robert McNamara—that there was commanding and constant pressure on all of Uncle Sam’s people in Vietnam to “report” what was positive, to see the conflict as Washington (in its distance and ignorance) perceived it. This folly was compounded by the fact that most of us were “in country” only 12 months or so; as someone famously observed, we “did not have a dozen years of experience in Vietnam...but one year of experience twelve times.”

Many can give instances of this, all the way from the 1950s, when we first were denying that it was a civil war, to the final agonies and tragedies of the fall of Saigon’s forces and America’s aims, in 1974—when Ambassador Graham Martin, refusing to admit the obvious, forbade official Americans everywhere to prepare for evacuation (and in doing so, to protect and rescue the thousands of Vietnamese who, having trusted us and worked closely with us, were to be sacrificed when we finally, in panic and in spite of Ambassador Martin, fled).

My part of the war was tiny, tiny. But because I wasn’t happy being there, because I was with one of the smallest organizations, because I learned much from Rand Corporation friends and from Vietnamese interlocutors, and because, I suppose, of a certain ornery streak and probably a disinclination to be an unquestioning team player, I at least contributed a tiny bit to the small flow of somewhat more “honest” verbiage which was, however, at each higher level of command, shaped, squelched, denied, ignored and “corrected.”

I was, for some 18 months in 1965-67, the representative of JUSPAO, the “Joint United States Public Affairs Office,” in two very different provinces southwest of Saigon, in the Vietnamese Delta. In each, we had an American “province team,” modeled after the “country team” which, in every embassy, brings together the various sections and bureaucratic entities in the building. The embassy country teams, though, have a powerful chairman: the ambassador. Our province teams had no such head-knocker—unless, as was unlikely, the several civilians would concede this role to our American military member.

In Kien Tuong province, a poor and Godforsaken spot in the Plain of Reeds, our province team comprised the Major who commanded the Special Forces teams, the chief of the local USAID office, the CIA representative... and me. Each month a report had to be put together, following a format set by the military. And each month we rotated the responsibility for its drafting.

The format had about eight questions. For each, there was hardly space for more than 200 words or so. The eighth asked: “Do you have any problems? Identify.”

The first month that I was to draft the team’s answer I skipped over this, as had my colleagues each time. But when my turn came the next time, I wasn’t willing to let this one go.

“Yes,” I wrote, adding something like this:

“The indigenous population of this province are ethnic Vietnamese, Buddhist, poor farmers and at least passive supporters of the Viet Cong. Our mission is complicated by the fact that our side is, at present, made up almost entirely of outsiders: Catholic refugees from North Vietnam (including the province chief and local forces commander), Chinese and Cambodian special forces units and Americans. This is the basic problem, and challenge.”

My USAID colleague applauded this. The CIA rep went along with it reluctantly. “But this will never get through,” he said. The Special Forces major said it was stupid, and that this wasn’t the meaning of the question. But he was outvoted by the civilians, 3-1, so the report “went forward.”

There were corresponding multiagency “teams” at the corps level, and in Saigon. But en route from the province to corps it had to pass through the MAC/V (military advisory command, Vietnam) division headquarters, headed by a tall, ramrod-straight colonel. The division headquarters was just outside of My Tho, the capital of my other province, Dinh Tuong, where I spent most of each week. He called me in and was, as he would say, “f—ing furious.”

“What is this bullshit, Dickerman?” he shouted, although I was just on the other side of his desk.

“Well, (whatever his first name was), it asked whether we had any problems, and we identified the main one,” I said. (In this conversation, as in every other with an American military officer in Vietnam, I assiduously avoided the word “Sir” lest I be conceding some degree of command authority to him).

“This is goddamned not what this question is about, Dickerman,” he yelled again.

“It asked us to identify the problem.”

“A PROBLEM, Dickerman, is that you don’t have enough mortar rounds so you can’t conduct H&I fire, or you don’t have an appropriate something or other. And the most important thing, Dickerman, is that anyone who is stupid enough to name a problem in a report like this had Goddamned better say right then what action he has taken to solve this problem. That may not be true in civilian life. But in the Army, if we have problems, we Goddamned well solve them.”

He ordered me to delete my (our!) response. I declined.

He said he would finish my Goddamned career; he would throw me out of the country. I left.

Some days later, my office in Saigon said that I was being put in for a “meritorious honor award.”

“Evidently,” my boss’s boss explained while shouting into the field telephone, “you pissed off the military. A general wants your ass out of there. So you must be doing something right.

“Congratulations.”

There are many routes to glory.

