SOJOURN: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia Vol. 31, No. 2 (2016), pp. 497–531 DOI: 10.1355/sj31-2d

ISSN 0217-9520 print / ISSN 1793-2858 electronic

Propaganda and the Public: The Shaping of Opinion in the Southern Vietnamese Countryside during the Second Indochina War

David Hunt

In the Mekong Delta province of Mỹ Tho, village populations paid attention to print and electronic media controlled by the Government of Vietnam in Saigon and by the National Liberation Front during the early 1960s. They also relied for news on rumours and on information circulating on the grapevine. At first, NLF militants benefited from their dialogue with an ascendant rural public. But after 1965 mounting violence complicated Front efforts to stay in touch with its mass base, and the grapevine assumed an even greater importance for people in the countryside. On the eve of the Tet Offensive of 1968, the choices made by rural dwellers helped to determine the course of the Second Indochina War.

Keywords: Second Indochina War, National Liberation Front, Government of Vietnam, rural public, newspapers and radio broadcasts, rumours and the grapevine, Tet Offensive.

This is an article on propaganda wars between the National Liberation Front (NLF) and the Saigon-based Government of Vietnam (GVN), and it is also about the evolution of public opinion in the rural areas of the Mekong Delta during the 1960s. I question propaganda studies that focus on the instruments and messages crafted by the propagandists and say little or nothing about the ways that their appeals are accepted, rejected, misconstrued or ignored by the target audience.[1] My claims on behalf of a "rural public", a term that some might dismiss as an oxymoron, are, again, intended as a response to a certain kind of scholarship, which assumes enlightened discourse to be an urban phenomenon.[2] While outsiders worked to shape mass

sentiment, villagers found ways on their own to track current events and to make choices that shaped the course of history.

My analysis is based on materials from Mỹ Tho Province, forty miles south of Saigon. On being asked in 1965 to explain how inhabitants gathered "news on current events", a man from Phú Qúi village in Mỹ Tho declared,

> We had GVN newspapers (bought at the market). We had radios (from 5 to 10 in my hamlet). We frequently went to the market (at Cai Lậy [district town]) where there was an information center. We also got news by word of mouth. The Front also gathered us together from time to time to tell us about their military victories.

He went on to note that villagers "listened to all kinds of news, but each one would have his own opinion about what he had heard".[3] In response to the same query, an informant from Long Trung village cited "rumors among the people, a Front newspaper, radio broadcasts, which we seldom had a chance to listen to but which gave rise to rumors, and then GVN leaflets dropped from aircraft". In addition, "now and then, a person bought a paper from the towns, and brought it back to read". He further stated that "people believed in the rumors they spread among themselves. These rumors were based on the newspapers of both sides and also on the counting of the casualties they saw on their way to the market".[4]

These comments suggest that people in Mỹ Tho attended to messages from the Front and the government, but that they also credited reports delivered by word of mouth and "believed in the rumors they spread among themselves".[5] A chance remark someone heard in passing or a reference to an incident glimpsed from afar might seem like a trivial thing. But the grapevine can also be understood as a repository of the observations and impressions, the hopes and alarms that make up the collective consciousness of a society. In the Mekong Delta of the 1960s, the rumour mill relied on a widening array of sources and attracted an increasing number of listeners. It functioned as an informal news service for country people with a need to know and transformed the propaganda war between the Front and the Saigon government into a triangular configuration.[6]

My analysis of propaganda and the public begins with attention to the instruments adopted by the propagandists. Their efforts to arouse support by means of leaflets, newspapers and radio programming collided with the reality that most villagers were at best semi-literate and that only a minority owned radios. Perhaps the impact of these efforts would have been greater if the audience had been as passive as many outsiders assumed. But in the countryside the Front and the GVN were trying to reach a public insistent on its right to independent judgment. Saigon officials without deep ties to rural life failed to win many converts to the GVN's cause, and, while Front cadres were local people with a recognized place in the village world, their appeals elicited a response only when they corresponded to popular sentiment.

In the second half of this article, I take a chronological approach and argue that the rural public rose to the height of its power and influence over issues of public importance in the period between the concerted uprising of 1959–60 and the Tet Offensive of January 1968. During those years, villagers in Mỹ Tho repeatedly shaped the course of events in ways that governments in Saigon, Hanoi and Washington were obliged to take into account. Widely circulating rumours helped to launch revolt against the Saigon government, and in the following years NLF militants found common ground with peasants viewed not as a captive audience but as an already mobilized citizenry longing for change. After the escalation of combat in 1965, mounting violence complicated Front efforts to stay in touch with its mass base and the grapevine came to assume an even greater importance for country people. Efforts to understand their thinking help to explain the Tet Offensive.

Limits of the Propaganda Arsenal

The grapevine was embedded in social relations. A radio would have helped, but, a Front soldier declared, the main problem was that his unit was stationed in the forest where "there were no people around" and therefore no opportunity to hear the latest news.[7] A man from

Phú Phong kept informed "by listening to the villagers' discussions in the ricefields".[8] In Thạnh Phú, Cai Lậy district, "between themselves the villagers talked about all kinds of taboo topics".[9] In Xuân Sơn, "the youths in the village liked to talk politics when they attended banquets or when they sat around drinking tea or when they conversed with each other about their daily work. They talked about the world situation, socialism, Russia and China."[10] In Cẩm Sơn, "villagers were free to discuss the current events among themselves", and the topics they addressed included the latest "coup d'état in Saigon".[11]

A chart of the grapevine would constitute a map of relations among hamlet dwellers and between them and sources in the wider world. Market places in large villages, district capitals, Mỹ Tho city and Saigon served as loci for the exchange of views and information as well as for buying and selling. Someone from Qườn Long declared that "whatever was reported by the people who came back from the market was believed by the villagers, because they lived in the village and were familiar to the villagers".[12] "On many occasions", remarked an informant from Nhị Qúy, "the news given by the Saigon newspapers was checked by the women who went to the market". "I suggest that GVN propagandists be sent to the markets to work", he added, "because there were many women who could bring back to the village all they had learned."[13]

Rural dwellers also travelled to population centres for medical care, in search of jobs and to visit relatives, then returned home with gleanings from the outside world. Soldiers on leave and worshippers on religions pilgrimages did the same. "It was simple" to verify Front news bulletins, asserted a guerrilla. "The villagers who often moved in and out of the liberated zone" could testify to the veracity of their reports.[14] A resident of Nhị Mỹ heard about the bombing of another village in the province by American B-52 planes from neighbours who came home after having "gone elsewhere to work".[15] News of the whereabouts of recruits who had deserted their unit in the NLF 514th battalion filtered back, according to a Mỹ Lương resident, when "a young woman in my neighbourhood, whose husband lives in Saigon", learned that they had taken refuge there.[16]

The NLF and GVN propaganda machines had to compete with these informal circuits of information and opinion. To make its case, the Front published several newspapers, usually in six-page editions featuring war news along with sections offering poems and short stories. Informants mentioned *Tin Tức* (News), covering events in Mỹ Tho and appearing every five days; *Ấp Bắc*, named after the site of the 1963 battle won by the Front and printed by the NLF province-level propaganda bureau once or twice a month; the bimonthly *Giải Phóng Miền Nam* (Liberation of the South); *Chiến Thắng* (Victory), handed out with *Tin Tức* to soldiers in the NLF 261st battalion; *Thanh Hải*, put together by the Front regional committee and with one copy distributed to each village; *Nhân Dân* (The People), also published by the region and appearing monthly, perhaps with a digest from the newspaper of the same name in the north; and *Văn Nghệ Mỹ Tho* (Mỹ Tho Literary Magazine), with one issue for each hamlet.[17]

In spite of low levels of literacy in the Mekong Delta, print documents made an impact because reading tended to be a social as well as an individual activity, with the best reader stepping forward and reading aloud to others. A well-off landowner in Bình Ninh enjoyed reading newspapers purchased in Mỹ Tho city "and many villagers called on him to read to them too"[18] — a request that he honoured, perhaps with commentary provided. The Front did not overlook such opportunities. It organized "paper reading" cells in 1963 and 1964, "and those who possessed a rather good educational level were assigned to read papers or magazines to a certain number of families after receiving materials from the Propaganda, Entertainment and Culture Section".[19]

Villagers who examined Front publications "out of curiosity"[20] were not always satisfied with their contents. One reader complained that they were

> too dry and were inferior to city newspapers which also carried world news and a section on literature (*văn nghệ*). All the Front newspapers said was about joining the army, setting up roadblocks, and fighting. The news of the battles would be a

> month old before we could read about it in the Front newspapers. By that time, we would have already known about it by reading city newspapers.[21]

This commentator, a poor peasant, might at first glance seem unqualified as a media critic. Fifty-one years old, he had served in the Việt Minh, had often sojourned outside his village, and had a cousin who "worked with the Telecommunication service in Saigon". Perhaps his preferences were shared by other well-travelled villagers.[22]

The NLF "information center" in Long Khánh was "a small hut", only two metres square, with "leaflets and flags" pasted on the walls, but no books or newspapers.[23] When an informant stated that "bulletins" were nailed to trees "for personal reading", he added that they were posted only "after being read to villagers", suggesting that social reading had to come first.[24] A broadsheet on a tree required a solitary effort. "Because of my lack of education", explained an informant from Nhị Qúy, "I had to stand there a long time in order to read. So I didn't read."[25] Even people who read easily were reluctant to linger on a militarized terrain, and several informants mentioned that they never did so for fear of being spotted by passing GVN soldiers.[26] The rare bulletin that went beyond announcing victories to summarize "internal and foreign news" was also unusual in that it was delivered to "villagers in their own homes", where it could be read aloud and studied at length.[27]

Increased bombing and shelling of the countryside damaged Front print shops and endangered groups assembled for paper reading sessions. "There was only a paper entitled 'Ấp Bắc', issued by the province", noted a cadre in September 1966. He recalled that at its peak, over four thousand copies were issued, but

> this quantity was cut down in 1965, and is now much reduced, due to bombing and shelling from the GVN and allied forces. Moreover, papers have become useless as there are no more "paper reading" cells to help the local people learn about current events. I don't know the exact quantity, but I guess that about 2,000 or 3,000 copies were issued in recent months.[28]

A witness reported in January 1968 that NLF cadres used to distribute bulletins every two or three months, but "no longer did so during the

past two years".[29] It could be that military discipline held together an audience for Front news among soldiers, while villagers drifted away. "The cadres used to suggest that I read [NLF print materials] at night after we had already attended a tiring study session", recalled a combatant in the 263rd battalion, but "I was too sleepy by then".[30] The overall impression is of a shrinking readership for NLF print materials.

GVN leaflets "rained down everywhere in the Front-controlled areas".[31] "We found them all over, in the field, in the garden, and in the river", reported an informant from Mỹ Thành.[32] Some reported military victories or claimed success in the air war in the north against the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) or called attention to diplomatic developments, such as President Johnson's February 1966 meeting with Saigon leaders in Honolulu. Others floated rumours aiming to demoralize the liberated zone, such as the one about Front plans for a forced loan, in the shape of "bonds" that inhabitants would be required to buy.[33] Still others ordered villagers to vacate terrain that U.S. or GVN forces intended to sweep or to bomb and shell.

Initially, leaflets seemed no more than playthings, and in Long Bình Điền, "all the children swarmed out to pick them up".[34] But adults also gathered these missives, which were "passed from hand to hand"[35] and held for possible use when proof of good will towards the government might be needed. "I used to keep one of them in my pocket in order to show it to GVN soldiers if they came across me", stated an informant. "I would then tell them that I was going to rally."[36]

The Front failed to prevent leaflets from blanketing the countryside, but the benefit for the government was negligible when not accompanied by social reading. "Armed propaganda" teams needed to go "to the grassroots level to take care of the people and mobilize them", suggested one defector. Such an approach would "familiarize the people with the benevolent nature of the GVN".[37] It did not help that the Saigon message was mixed, as one leaflet, filled with assurances of good will, gave way to another, full of menace, if compliance was not forthcoming. The Front did not want people

reading calls to defect, but rural dwellers had no way of knowing in advance what sort of information the leaflets contained and were obliged to see for themselves. "The villagers seemed to believe the leaflets, especially when they dealt with upcoming bombing or battles", an informant declared before adding, with perhaps unintended irony, "they were still not quite sure of the leniency of the GVN".[38]

GVN officials subsidized newspapers, provided them with directives on stories to print, and controlled the distribution networks that delivered issues to customers. Police looked the other way when "patriotic" mobs sacked the headquarters of publishing houses that got out of line and arrested journalists deemed guilty of supporting Communism or defaming the government (Scigliano 1964, pp. 174–77). Still, this censored press found an audience. "Housewives", "old men", "rich farmers" and "the boat owners who regularly went to Mỹ Tho [city]" all acquired papers in the market place and brought them back to their villages.[39] Among other topics, publications dealt with "Front defeats and American aid to Vietnam".[40]

In Bàn Long, cadres issued a prohibition against "reactionary newspapers from the GVN-controlled areas", but found that there was "no realistic measure to keep the people from violating the restriction". In any case, most villagers

> were poor, uneducated, and seldom paid attention to any kind of newspapers, GVN or VC, except a small number of middle farmers who knew how to read and sometimes smuggled in old papers (which were sold for wrapping purposes) from the GVN areas to read.[41]

In Đông Hòa Hiệp, ten villagers read Saigon papers, "but since they kept silent about what they had read, the village chapter committee did nothing against them".[42] A sense that "villagers who have taken refuge in the open fields prefer to read epic novels to daily papers" may also have encouraged cadres to look the other way.[43]

Front cadres were among the most attentive readers of Saigon publications and could not resist the temptation to cite them. When GVN militia shot two villagers in Ngũ Hiệp and the press asserted that they were "Việt Cộng", local militants protested "that all city

newspapers told lies, news from the puppet government (*ngụy quyền*) were lies, that there were civilians killed in every battle or GVN bombings and then it was still announced that the dead were VCs".[44] Critiques of this sort tacitly acknowledged the status of enemy propagandists as co-debaters and must have prompted at least some villagers to see for themselves what the other side had to say.

Radios cost eight hundred piasters or more in 1965, the equivalent of a month's wage for a day labourer, and were associated with other emblems of prosperity, such as "sampan motors" and "tile roofed houses".[45] Still, even poor peasants found ways to buy them, especially when sets at government-subsidized rates were available, as in Đạo Thạnh with its "many" radios, "given by the GVN".[46] The rich owned sets in An Thạnh Thủy, as did "those who were poor but desired a radio".[47] In Mỹ Hạnh Trung, ten of the twenty radios in one hamlet were owned by middle peasants, five by rich peasants, and five by poor peasants.[48]

Transistors easily passed from hand to hand, and listening, like reading, was often a social activity. "I was too poor to buy a radio", reported one informant, "but I listened to a radio at a friend's house".[49] "I borrowed radios from acquaintances in the village, for one day and one night", stated a man from Phú Kiết.[50] In most units of the NLF armed forces, no soldier owned a radio, and there might be only one or two in other units. But when quartered on the population, troops had access to the sets of their hosts. "The radios in the civilians houses only picked up Radio Saigon", noted one informant, "so that's what we listened to".[51]

Cadres urged villagers to tune in to Radio Hanoi, the Front's "Liberation" station, Radio Peking and, sometimes, Radio Moscow. Poor reception complicated efforts to build an audience for both Liberation and Radio Hanoi, and the northern accents of DRV announcers troubled some listeners. "The Front station was always talking about digging trenches", complained one informant.[52] Hanoi radio featured programmes on "methods of planting trees" and "cultivating better rice plants" and also functioned as a source of news.[53] "All the people in my village, like myself and the cadres,

were informed about the bombings of North Vietnam by GVN and American planes", reported a man from Thạnh Phú, Cai Lậy district; "we listened to details of these bombings broadcasted by Hanoi and Peiping".[54] Another listener asserted that the Chinese station supported the Front wholeheartedly and Moscow less so and that Liberation Radio was the fastest with the news, but Hanoi was more accurate, because it took the time to check on details.[55]

In the early 1960s, popular pressure discouraged villagers from dialing into GVN stations. "I did not dare listen to their news out of fear of being criticized by the people", stated a cadre from Mỹ Hạnh Trung.[56] But as the war dragged on, Saigon outlets increasingly gained the attention of the public. Villagers "wanted to know what was going on on the government side".[57] They listened to reports on the air war in the North, peace negotiations and U.S. intervention. A well-regarded programme hosted by a woman named Dạ Lan offered a mix of modern and reformed theatre songs, war news and especially the host's replies to GVN soldiers' letters. "The speaker's voice is very soft and pleasant to listen to", remarked one listener, who particularly liked the modern song, "The Fighting Man's Love" (*Tình Anh Lính Chiến*).[58]

In Tân Thới, radios tuned in to GVN stations were "confiscated immediately" by the Front,[59] and in Cẩm Sơn, "those who listened to the Saigon broadcasts had been strongly criticized and had undergone the reduction-of-prestige treatment".[60] But even in Cẩm Sơn, according to another informant, it was "impossible to exercise a strict control".[61] As with print materials, efforts to censor radio broadcasts were undercut when cadres "permitted people to tune in to the Saigon station" at times when there were "changes of government in Saigon"[62] or called attention to "news that displeases the people, such as the question of juvenile delinquency in Saigon or the communiqués determining punishment measure[s] to be applied for the draft dodgers".[63]

On being told by cadres to stop listening to government stations, one man "was so angry that he broke the radio right in front of them",[64] and another "went home and smashed his radio into pieces as a protest".[65] Choosing passive resistance, others set the volume "just

loud enough to be understood" and listened "on the sly",[66] posted sentries when radios were on, or took note of cadre movements and tuned in at times of day when unwelcome intrusions were unlikely. Transistors could be carried into the paddy fields during work time, and earphones assured that forbidden broadcasts would not be heard by passers-by, a stratagem cadres themselves adopted for clandestine listening. In 1966 and 1967, villagers tuning in to GVN broadcasts "no longer are afraid of being denounced as they used to be before", said a defector interviewed in January 1968. "They seem not to care about the cadres, and in fact, the latter close their eyes, not exercising too tight a control".[67]

The GVN propaganda machine reached, but did not convert, a mass audience. "It was announced that the United States was aiding Vietnam to defeat the Communists and that South Vietnam was a great tomb for the Communists", recalled a soldier. "I liked to listen to newscasts to broaden my knowledge", he added; "I thought the news from Saigon radio was about 80% true."[68] A second informant estimated that radio emissions were 70 per cent true, while others declared that city newspaper stories were 50 per cent, leaflets 70 per cent, and GVN propaganda in general 70 per cent true.[69] It seems that people thought government sources could not be taken at face value.

The GVN campaign to change hearts and minds also employed loudspeakers mounted on planes. Some broadcasts called on Front personnel to rally, while others warned the population to clear out of free-fire zones. "They appealed to the people to come into the GVN areas and not to stay in areas where the VC are, because it is very dangerous", said an informant from Long Trung. "They were told to go away and let the Government annihilate the VC."[70] In Phú An, "the women and the children heard the broadcasts and evacuated, mistaking them for a forewarning of an imminent bombing".[71] In Bình Trủng, women "urged one another to cajole their crying child into silence in order to be able to hear the broadcast more distinctly".[72]

When in July 1965 a plane came over Phú Nhuận Đông broadcasting a message, the people "were scared and they fled",

while the village party secretary "just ran around and shouted, 'Don't listen, don't listen, it's a pack of lies'".[73] One might wonder what the pilot and crew were thinking as they looked down and saw panic-stricken Vietnamese scattering in all directions. A defector thought that propaganda broadcasting was "a good thing, but it needs to be more distinct. Let us bomb and strafe them to make them afraid. They will think about rallying to the GVN."[74] It was a recommendation that captured the tendency of anti-NLF psychological-warfare operations to shade over into warfare plain and simple.[75]

Still, people continued to read and listen to messages from the government, a practice the NLF could not repress. Its failure to censor the rumour mill was perhaps of even greater moment, and, indeed, Front militants themselves were caught up in the grapevine. A security cadre assigned to monitor the public mood declared that people were in the habit of "talking too much" and that "of every ten people, nine are indiscrete and only one is discrete". "At bus stations, in restaurants, at drinking stands", the alert listener could pursue "the task of gathering information."[76] He might have added that Front personnel themselves often proved to be "indiscrete". A demolition specialist could not resist the entreaties of an acquaintance who was curious about his mission and revealed plans to attack a nearby bridge. "My friend was so happy about this that he told his family", reported the specialist, "and everyone in the village knew about our plan." The action had to be abandoned — "even though the GVN hadn't found out about it".[77]

Out of the loop, government officials were the last to know. But the more significant point is that Front personnel themselves "talked too much". Residents in Thạnh Phú, Châu Thành district, learned that American troops were coming to Mỹ Tho after village cadres "disclosed the news to their relatives and this is how every villager knew about it".[78] Speaking in January 1968, an informant in Phú Nhuận Đông recalled having heard from a friend of a friend who happened to be "a village committee member" that the Front was preparing a mass mobilization of all men between the ages of eighteen and forty-five.[79] An aspiring militant found out that he would not be admitted to the Communist Party because he belonged "to a bad

family". He knew because "a few villagers, who had happened to overhear the discussion of the village cadres about my status, told me so".[80] After "a few drinks with the local infrastructure", a man from Tân Phước picked up information about "three Front boats" that "sailed to sea at night to transport ammunition".[81]

The NLF undermined its own efforts to control the flow of information in another, unintended, fashion. By enlisting villagers, sending them here and there on assignment, and gathering them in district, province and regional study sessions, it was expanding social relations and access to sources of news. Front army deployments further activated the rumour mill, because units were constantly running into each other and because troops were often quartered on the population, so that exchanges between peasants and soldiers were an everyday occurrence. According to a combatant, troops learned of "current events from the villages we came across during our frequent moves".[82] Some thought that "the fighters moved a lot and met each other more often than the cadres" and therefore found more opportunities for the exchange of news and opinions.[83] This informant, a deserter presumably cut off from official sources, found out about coming attacks from "friends in the company" who revealed plans "while drinking wine with me".[84]

The NLF worked hard to shape opinion in the countryside, but its messages remained a human artefact, and the people who absorbed and transmitted them were tangled up in webs of communication that by the nature of their political and military activities they tended to inform and enlarge. In their everyday functioning, they watered the grapevine, ensuring that it would flourish in a manner that no sovereign power could control. The expansion of the movement, the way it heightened personal mobility and multiplied contacts worked to consolidate an independent public in the countryside.

The Rural Public from the Concerted Uprising to the Tet Offensive

Meeting in Hanoi in January 1959, the Central Committee of the Communist Party arrived at decisions that played a part in bringing on the Second Indochina War. Some members favoured a call for

revolution, while others preferred a more measured approach, and the instructions they transmitted to loyalists in the South reflected these hesitations and disagreements. The Resolution instructed southern party members to mobilize anti-government sentiment in the hamlets, but stopped short of authorizing a general uprising against the GVN. It made reference to a coming phase of armed struggle, but cautioned that for the time being insurgents should resort to violence only in self-defence (Elliott 2003, p. 215).

"Direct radio communication" between Hanoi and the Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN), the party's forward headquarters on the Cambodia border, "was not established until August 1961" (ibid., p. 229), and as a result it took many months for a version of Resolution 15 to reach provincial party leaders in Mỹ Tho. In their meeting on 21–23 January 1960, they "did not much discuss the contents of the Resolution", one participant recalled. "The comrades focused only on its general spirit, that is, giving permission for armed struggle" (ibid., p. 241).

Before orders from Hanoi arrived, the province committee had already heard rumours and reports of military actions directed against GVN patrols and outposts in Long An and Kiến Tường provinces adjoining Mỹ Tho (ibid., p. 234), and the "major battle" won by a battalion-sized force on 25 September 1959, in nearby Kiến Phong province, sent an even more unmistakable message that war was imminent (ibid., p. 235). As for Bến Tre, just across Mỹ Tho's southeastern border, "province leadership sprang into action" with plans for an "uprising" without waiting for clearance from higher echelons (ibid., p. 237).

Meanwhile, in Mỹ Tho province itself, as early as June 1959, cadres in Nhị Binh village had come out from underground and were openly calling for revolt, and later that year Mỹ Thành had been "liberated" (ibid., p. 231). NLF cadres in Dông Hòa were tearing up GVN flags and anti-communist signs before news of Resolution 15 arrived,[85] and in Bình Trủng, "Liberation Forces" armed with "long sharp sabers" torched a sentry post and information booth and pictures of President Ngô Đình Diệm.[86] In Dưỡng Điềm, the Front

burned down watch towers and arrested two GVN officials.[87] In Phú Nhuận Đông, the "Liberation Army" overran a military outpost and killed several GVN militia.[88] In Tam Hiệp, the Front "arrested and executed two GVN officials, "called on villagers to beat on drums and wooden fish to show off the strength of the concerted uprising campaign", tore down GVN flags, and burned watch towers and an information booth.[89] These were local rather than province-wide initiatives in some of the ninety-odd villages in Mỹ Tho province, but they indicate that pressure for action was intensifying before January 1960.

In short, the instrumental role of Resolution 15 is easily exaggerated. In the absence of a modern telecommunications system, party leaders in Hanoi had to rely on informal means of transmission. Their missives must have been passed on from group to group and person to person, copied by hand at relay stations along the way or conveyed by speakers in clandestine groups while others scribbled notes. What finally emerged was a rumour, important no doubt, but still only one among many issuing out of a grapevine already alive with bulletins from many quarters and at a time when events seemed to be building towards a major explosion. The Mỹ Tho province committee itself had already decided back in May 1959 that the moment "for renewed action" had come, but then chose to wait until "permission to go with armed self-defense came down from higher levels" (Elliott 2003, p. 226). In January 1959, they seized on the necessary signal, but with "armed self-defense" lost in translation and a call for "armed struggle" heard in its place.[90]

The instructions passed on by province leaders to district and village levels were in turn inadequate, given that "armed struggle" without arms seemed like a recipe for disaster. As a participant in the January meeting had noted, once the people "were involved in illegal activities, how could they stay legal? No one clarified this matter" (Elliott 2003, p. 241). The solution was found in "guerrilla theater" improvizations and the rumours they launched,[91] as when instigators "organized about 40 or 50 really trusted persons into

groups carrying wooden rifles" and had them march through all the hamlets", with the result that "rumors" spread that large "well-armed regular forces" were massing against the GVN.[92] In Phú Nhuận Đông, leaders urged villagers to knock "on everything that could produce a sound", thus creating an uproar that made it seem as if "the whole population had decided to stand behind the Front and that the huge manpower would give the Front the necessary punch to overcome anything".[93]

Word of mouth spread news of these provocations and encouraged people in other villages to follow suit. In Châu Thành district, "the rumor spread very quickly that the Front was very strong. The GVN intelligence services were also deceived into thinking so, and this shook up the ARVN soldiers."[94] In Hội Cư, "the people's rumors" convinced GVN forces "that the Front was very strong militarily", even though the guerrillas "had only three sky-horse rifles, a few homemade rifles, knives, machetes, and a few French grenades, bamboo sticks and rocks". The inhabitants were excited, and "rumors made people believe that the Front was protected by a very strong armed force".[95] Government authorities "couldn't control the situation" and soldiers "didn't dare to venture beyond one kilometer from the post".[96] In Bình Trủng, "panic stricken" local militias "were too afraid to dare resist", in spite of the fact that "the cadres of the Front were nothing but a handful of unarmed people". Guards and officials fled, and "no administrative authorities remained in the hamlets".[97] After the initial appearance of the Front in Long Hủng, a local cadre was concerned that government troops might intervene. On his suggestion, "about 20 women" from the village went to the nearest GVN post and reported "that the Front members had come in to tear up the pictures of [GVN President] Ngô Đình Diệm [and] take down the inter-family plaques and the anti-communist signs". The soldiers were frightened and "couldn't think of any measure to cope with the situation".[98]

Who starts a rumour is not as important as the collective mood that keeps rumours alive and relays them to a widening audience. Resolution 15 began as a muddled set of instructions, and by the

time its guidelines reached province-level party members, they had taken on a different meaning. From the province to villages, new rumours circulated through the grapevine in a way that changed collective consciousness in the countryside. "Nobody was well-informed about the Front, but rumors about it were abundant", recalled a man from Bình Trủng. "The Front was said to have a wide network everywhere, a great strength, very powerful forces."[99] In portraying Front propaganda as a ruse, this informant was caught in the snares of a circular argument. To generate "abundant" rumors, there had to be already in place a "wide network", and claims of "great strength" and "powerful forces" gained credibility only because they were coming from many sources. Fast-spreading rumours galvanized people's sense of their own power. In Tân Lý Đông, villagers "saw a lot of people appearing in the roads carrying weapons and looking very strong and brave whereas in reality their weapons were only made of wood". They then "silently talked to each other that the Liberation troops would obtain the victory as they did at Diện Biên Phủ". Young people "seemed particularly excited" and "enthusiastically joined the VC and beat noisily on the drums".[100] Wary silence had given way to a riotous clamour. The grapevine turned a group of instigators with a handful of weapons and a few "bamboo sticks and rocks" into a popular movement capable of launching a concerted uprising.

In the months and years that followed the initial stages of the uprising, Front militants achieved considerable success in gaining the support of the rural population. Those in charge of propaganda saw themselves as "masters of polemics",[101] and GVN officials agreed that "the communists are more clever propagandists than we are" (Race 1973, p. 199). Cadres "incessantly held many study sessions, telling the people about the very things they wanted to hear".[102] At first, a twenty-year-old sharecropper from Long Hủng hesitated to join the uprising, but then concluded that it was "well coordinated and apparently squared with the people's aspirations for social justice". "I told my neighbors to cooperate with the Front cadres", he recalled.

> At that time, the people enjoyed very much the meetings held by the NLF, during which the Front cadres revealed to the audience the Front's platform and its anti-government position. They also corroborated the Front's viewpoint, contending they could no longer endure the Ngô Đình Diệm regime's oppression.[103]

In Vĩnh Kim, crowds

> were so fond of attending the village meetings that, sometimes, they were regretful that some meetings ended so soon. During these sessions, they lingered around the meeting places, discussing the Front's policies, the cadres' behavior, and the cruelty of Diệm's regime until late at night.[104]

Mobilization was not a one-way process. It happened when militants and people exchanged views and people conferred among themselves and a consensus emerged about what needed to be done.

Front cadres also served as news broadcasters. "As a rule", one informant noted, "before introducing the new policy to them, the village secretary always spoke of the international and home political situation so as to make the villagers become more enthusiastic about paying taxes to help the Front."[105] A cadre in Thanh Hòa stated,

> I do not think that the villagers believed news coming from the Front's sources, perhaps because they dealt with events which took place too far from my hamlet. As for the [battle of] Ấp Bắc (1963), the villagers believed that it had been won by the Front's forces, because they were told so by their friends or relatives.[106]

An NLF platoon leader recalled that he "believed completely all the news originating from above" and reasoned that, since Front news "was announced by other countries, it could not be false".[107] Summing up local reactions to NLF claims, another informant specified that villagers "would not believe in them except when there was concrete evidence".[108]

Local militants also made use of movies "about the victory at Ấp Bắc and at many other places".[109] But audience reactions to visual images could not be taken for granted. When a documentary on the Việt Minh victory over French forces at Điện Biên Phủ in 1954 was shown to villagers in Bình Đức, cadres "didn't dare" screen the

second half of the film "because it consisted of the battle itself with a lot of dead and wounded". But on being exposed to earlier scenes,

> all the villagers were frightened by what they saw, because in the movie the civilian laborers had to carry heavy loads and they had to run and take cover all the time because of the aircraft strafing and bombing. It looked like an awful thing to go through.[110]

Here and elsewhere, the Front tried to mould, but could not command, the subjectivities of country people.

The interplay between local drama teams and their audiences proved more impactful than media created by outsiders. Residents in Tam Bình "contributed money to the entertainment group so they could buy a stage curtain, drum and clarinet",[111] and in Bình Trủng the troupe "flooded the village with songs and music".[112] People enjoyed *vọng cổ or cô nhắc*[113] and *cải lương*.[114] Some cadres preferred "modern" songs associated with the Việt Minh and the DRV and claimed that reformed opera lulled the population "with soft music".[115] "According to the directives coming from high echelons, the Entertainment teams have to pay more attention to modern songs", reported a district cadre. But, he added, the troupes "were very fond of reformed theater songs and therefore, most of their compositions dealt with what they liked best".[116]

An observer noted that "the Provincial Entertainment group, which was an autonomous unit, would come to entertain the troops. They performed Reformed Musicals."[117] Another informant commented that the province team was divided into two sections, with seven members in the "modern" and twenty-three in the "classical" sections.[118] A third witness, from Phú An, testified that his entertainment group staged both modern music and reformed musicals, accompanied by guitars and mandolins.[119] A man from Xuân Đông noted that Catholics liked "modern tunes" and non-Catholics preferred "reformed theater songs".[120] One critic declared, "I like the popular tunes much more than reformed theater songs which I think are dull and boring" — an opinion challenged by a listener, who asserted that Northern songs were "not very appealing", they had "no scent" (*không mùi*).[121]

Tastes varied among country people, but just about everyone seems to have loved music. *Cải lương* and other genres had no fixed political significance, and in the Mỹ Tho of the early 1960s, "gay" and "nostalgic" tunes served political ends because performers and crowds came together in a project whose meanings were shaped by the collective consciousness of the moment. Taking their cue from the audience, NLF cadres joined in the applause. As one put it, "the most valuable experience was the realization that the people were very fond of these entertainments and that they were the best vehicle for Front propaganda".[122]

The Saigon government tried to build its own audience for musical programming, at first with modest results. "In 1964, the VC forbade the villagers to listen to GVN news", testified a guerrilla from Vĩnh Kim, but, apparently because live performances outmatched radio competition, they "allowed them to listen to the Reformed Theater songs".[123] It was a time when, according to a Hội Cư resident, "the people hated the GVN a great deal, and they didn't even want to listen to classical music over GVN stations".[124]

In 1965, Front entertainment teams began to lose their audience. On being asked if people were "fed up with the shows", a cadre responded,

> No, that wasn't it. The people are still very fond of the shows, but they daren't gather to attend them because they feared being shelled. As evidence, instead of attending the shows, they came there where the entertainers were rehearsing for the shows. But on the day of the performance nobody dared to come. The people were convinced that if they gathered in a crowd, the GVN would find out about it and shell them.[125]

In explaining the early success of the NLF entertainment troupes, another informant stated that the people "loved attending live performances for the simple reason that they had never had a chance to see it before". "However", he added, "they were very scared of artillery as they gathered to watch the shows [and] after the artists left, they always returned to their regular entertainment: the classical music from Radio Saigon."[126]

Cadres tried in vain to block GVN musical programming. “We loved to listen to cai luong (reformed musical plays) after a hard day”, testified one villager.[127] “When I listened to the radio”, stated another, “I only tuned in on the classical music, which is so lovely, and I did not listen to the news.” “Ever since I was a youth”, he added, “I have liked those lovely songs.”[128] In Long Trung, “the Front scolded the people for even listening to Reformed Musicals, but they did not dare to stop the people abruptly for fear that they would be called dictators; so they told the people to gradually stop listening to Saigon radio”.[129] In Đạo Thạnh, cadres permitted reformed theatre songs, “because the people would have continued to listen to them even if they were prevented from doing so”.[130]

The Front’s loss of an effective mobilization tactic and the growing audience for GVN musical programming formed part of a larger shift in the fortunes of the co-belligerents. Bombing and shelling of the countryside killed and wounded many and forced others to leave their homes, in the process diminishing opportunities for face-to-face proselytizing. In the midst of spreading chaos, clarity of vision gave way to doubt and confusion. Cadres “used to say that the Front was winning the war”, reported an informant in Cẩm Sơn, but “as a matter of fact, the village has been attacked by aircraft again and again. Many villagers were killed. The living conditions were poor. The villagers took refuge in secure areas.” Summing up a grim situation, he concluded, “maybe the Front was winning the war in some other places, but not in my village”.[131]

Others remembered that in the early 1960s the NLF had endorsed both Radio Moscow and Radio Peking and declared that support from superpower allies would checkmate U.S. imperialism and assure the success of the revolution. They were then shocked when broadcasts from the two capitals revealed the Sino-Soviet split. On being pressed for an explanation, a district cadre “didn’t know what to say and promised to study more about it and come back some other time to talk about it”.[132] Unable to shut down debate, the Front was tacitly inviting villagers “to study more” and to draw their own conclusions.[133]

Claims from many sources now collided in ways that NLF censors could not hide. In Cẩm Sơn, "some villagers believed the Front's news, but they all knew that the Front's victories were always exaggerated",[134] while others surmised that its news was "false" or perhaps just "incomplete".[135] "The details given by Hanoi were not in conformity with those given by Saigon", noted an informant, "but this surprised nobody."[136] It was apparent that both sides "either minimized their actual casualties or did not mention them at all".[137] A squad leader in the NLF 261st battalion reported that

> when some people gathered together to have a drink in the absence of the cadres, they would engage in animated discussions, then finally come to the conclusion that the Front certainly did not tell the whole truth, and neither did the city newspapers.

It was therefore up to them to consider the "difference between the two sources of information" and to decide among themselves which account was "more realistic".[138]

Villagers stitched together their own interpretations of ongoing developments. "I wanted to listen to different stations and to read Saigon newspapers so as to have enough information from various sources", declared a man from Vĩnh Kim; "that helped me to gain a better understanding of the general situation."[139] In Bình Thanh Đông, people tuned in to Saigon for "Dạ Lan's programme each evening", then switched to Hanoi and Peking because they "wanted to know about the assistance of the Socialist countries to Vietnam".[140] A cadre noticed that "Hanoi Radio itself recognizes the truthfulness of the news from the American station and bases its own news broadcasts on the VOA [Voice of America] news bulletins so as to announce the news on time."[141] Another informant reported that, "when the Communist Party members in Indonesia were purged, the VOA, Radio Peking and Radio Hanoi gave the same figure of those who were purged".[142] In Thạnh Phú, Cai Lậy district, "the people as well as the cadres don't believe the broadcasts from Radio Hanoi, Radio Liberation and the VOA and also from Saigon radio. They only like to listen to the BBC." This same informant noted that word of mouth served to spread awareness of this new source,

with villagers telling "each other about the frequencies of the BBC and the broadcast hours".[143]

Escalation of the war in 1965 forced the NLF on to the defensive and made it more vulnerable to rumours, as was evident when women from Catholic settlements in Xuân Đông "told one another that the VC were not willing to settle the war by negotiations, even though the GVN which is much stronger is ready to negotiate for peace. They held the VC responsible for all their hardships."[144] Some women, "coming from the non-Catholic area" of the village, reported these "rumours" to the village party secretary who, instead of waving off what some "were heard to say", twice gathered inhabitants in two-hour training sessions and argued that "the peace the villagers had heard of was only a false peace — a U.S. style peace — and therefore was not trustworthy". He further asserted that, "if such a peace came about, it would be only profitable for the rich because the landowners would rely on the Americans to seize back their land from the villagers". It therefore followed "that only when the Revolution is successful and the country liberated would the people have land to till". Rumours forced cadres to enter into debate, in which they could not offer assurances to those who were longing for peace.[145]

In 1966 and 1967, the Front could no longer claim that victory was imminent. At the same time, villagers keeping track of news saw no evidence of progress in negotiations to bring an end to the fighting. As warfare spread across the countryside, rumours prompted some people to consider moving out of their hamlets as a way to escape from the fighting. According to a man from Hậu Mỹ, "the people who returned to the Front controlled areas always talked about the living conditions in the GVN areas and the GVN policies". Some reported that government zones were very safe "and that the people who lived there didn't have to worry about bombing and shelling; that they worked in the daytime and slept at night. They were also given mosquito nets, blankets, rice, flour and milk." But the grapevine further reported that "though it was safe to live in GVN areas, it was harder to make a living there because they were expected to buy all the things they needed".[146]

Rumours of government malfeasance also made an impression. A man from Vĩnh Kim was told that many refugees "had not received any financial assistance from the GVN although it was announced that the GVN would assist anyone who left his hamlet to take refuge in GVN-controlled areas"; that government clerks demanded bribes before processing applications; and that officials were shifting aid earmarked for villagers who had left their homes to "many people who are not refugees". Anti-corruption measures appeared to change few minds. On hearing reports that several officials "were charged with embezzlement and bribery", villagers responded, "They accepted so many bribes in the past, they deserve to be killed (*ăn hối lộ nhiều quá, bây giờ chết cũng đáng*)."[147] Concerned about corruption and about earning a living, many decided that, in spite of war-related hardships, staying in the village orbit remained the preferable option.

In the last half of 1967, as bombing, shelling and troop sweeps by GVN forces put all rural dwellers at risk, new rumours brought about an upturn in the fortunes of the popular movement. According to a witness from Mỹ Thành, "while the Front has stopped waging propaganda in favor of its conscription policy, the youths took the initiative on their own to volunteer. This was the consequence of the ill-treatment they had received from the ARVN soldiers."[148] In August, a "rumour" spread that "several NLF armed units are regrouping in Cái Bè and Cai Lậy [districts] to support each other" and that "several big operations" were in the offing.[149] According to a man from Phú Kiết, people were telling each other

> that they were heading towards very special circumstances which would help the Front to be victorious. The cadres said: "We are heading towards a very propitious situation, a situation which only takes place once during a thousand years, and which will help the Front to seize power and to end the war".[150]

No one could yet envision the specific form big operations might take, but, "eventually, everybody will have to go all out in their assignments to seize the opportunity to defeat the enemy and to bring about peace".[151]

Building sentiment for an "all-out" campaign prepared the terrain for the Tet Offensive of January 1968. The proposal for an

attack on the cities on the eve of the Lunar New Year came from the DRV and passed down the chain of command to districts and villages in Mỹ Tho, where it arrived weeks after Front recruiters had been surprised by a new wave of volunteers for military service. The northern intervention fixed the objective and set the timing of the offensive, in hopes that it would strike urban targets and occur simultaneously from one end of South Vietnam to the other. As in 1959–60, Hanoi thus helped to give a concerted character to the campaign.

But, again, faraway policy decisions resonated in Mỹ Tho because attention to media reports and to word of mouth led country people to conclude that only a massive collective effort could bring peace. "There was, beneath the surface of temporary inactivity of many war-weary civilians, a remarkable reservoir of latent support for the revolution that was tapped during the Tet Offensive." A "general uprising" throughout the province, the second one in eight years, coincided with and lent impetus to the attack on the cities (Elliott 2003, p. 1044).[152]

The witness from Phú Kiết was twenty-one years old. After serving for a year as a medic in an NLF guerrilla unit, he had deserted, gone back home and then been obliged to provide labour services specified by local militants. With reference to cadre exhortations, he declared, "I thought it was sheer propaganda. I didn't even pay attention to them." But he did pay attention, and in giving the account in his interview six months later, in March 1968, he was able to offer a more than perfunctory description of near-millenarian fervour in the hamlets. As if weighing the alternatives, he delayed until the last minute before rallying "on the first day of the new Lunar year", just as the offensive was launched. He did not follow others who decided "to seize the opportunity to defeat the enemy and to bring about peace".[153] But, like them, he had heard rumours that armed NLF units were regrouping and preparing for a showdown and could see previously reluctant neighbours changing their minds and volunteering for military service. The choices made might differ, but rural populations were generally aware of their options in the days leading up to the Lunar New Year of 1968.[154]

Conclusion

Peasants in Mỹ Tho read newspapers and listened to radio broadcasts and sought answers to questions posed by war and revolution, just as did their urban counterparts. And yet, when put to the test in the Tet Offensive of January 1968, it emerged that there was not one public sphere in southern Vietnam, but rather two, each with its own web of social relations and its own grapevines. Hanoi planners counted on a minority of underground militants to prepare the urban battlefield and then to lead a mass uprising against the Saigon government. At the same time, they hoped to maintain secrecy, so that the enemy would not be able to anticipate and prepare for what was coming. But a successful effort to surprise GVN and American intelligence services was also bound to surprise the bulk of city dwellers. Unlike their rural counterparts, most had not been hearing about the prospect of a dramatic strike to end the war and, even if they had wished to do so, could not organize themselves overnight to participate in such a risky undertaking.

One might hazard that participants in the offensive succeeded in launching a dynamic that led in the end to withdrawal of American forces and the collapse of the GVN. But, as fighting dragged on for seven more years, those who survived must have felt bitter disappointment that hopes invested in a war-ending offensive had been dashed. Caught up in seemingly endless violence after 1968, the village world continued to change at a rate that no human agency could control. An ascendant phase during which southern Vietnam's rural public seemed to command both knowledge and power was coming to an end.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank Nguyễn Bá Chung, Thủy Hunt and Michael Montesano for helping him in the preparation of this article.

David Hunt is Professor of History at the University of Massachusetts at Boston, 100 Morrissey Boulevard, Boston, Massachusetts 02125, USA; email: david.hunt@UMB.edu.

NOTES

1. See Auerbach and Castronovo (2013) for a collection of essays on propaganda. I wish more contributors to that volume had followed the lead of the editors who, in their introduction, declare that "people consume propaganda, but they also produce and package their own information just as they also create and spin their own truths" (p. 9).
2. Historians of the public sphere in Vietnam reserve the floor for city-based intellectuals who, according to Philippe Peycam, strove to "fashion a new consciousness for themselves and for the Vietnamese people at large" (Peycam 2012, p. 32). Shawn McHale defines the public sphere as "the space below the state and *above the village* in which individuals and groups engage in symbolic exchange and struggle" (McHale 2004, p. 7; emphasis added). These are path-breaking books. But we also need a more capacious notion of the public sphere.
3. Many citations in this article are drawn from RAND Corporation interviews with prisoners and defectors from the National Liberation Front in Định Tường Province, known to inhabitants as Mỹ Tho. They are found in the DT (Định Tường) Series in RAND 1972. The informant from Phú Qúi is cited in DT interview 19, pages 7–8, question 19, in truncated form as "DT interview 19/7–8/19". All further citations to RAND interviews follow this same truncated format. The first interviews were conducted in June 1965 and the last in January 1968. The transcripts were made publicly available on four microfilm reels, which correspond to four more or less distinct phases of the project. Reel 1 contains interviews 1–101, almost all from the last half of 1965. Reel 2 includes interviews 102–151, mostly from 1966. Reel 3 (152–217) is from the first half of 1967 and Reel 4 (217–293) from the second half of 1967. For more on the RAND materials, see Hunt (2008, pp. 225–34). Unless otherwise indicated, all toponyms refer to villages in Mỹ Tho. References to Mỹ Tho alone indicate the province, to be distinguished from Mỹ Tho city, the provincial capital. The "Republic of Vietnam" is the proper name for the Saigon government, but the term "Government of Vietnam" is employed in the RAND transcripts, and to avoid confusion, I have adopted that usage.
4. DT interview 43/17/109, 110, and 113. In 1959–60, the instigators who launched armed struggle against the GVN called themselves the "Liberation Front" or "Liberation Army", and in the following years references to "the Front" were common in the Delta (as in the two citations in this paragraph). The Lao Động Party (Worker's Party) was the official name of Vietnam's Communist Party, with its headquarters in Hanoi. In December 1960, Hanoi leadership formed the National Liberation Front to carry

on and lead the southern struggle. The GVN and the Americans referred to NLF personnel as the "Viet Cong" or "VC". In 1962, northern party leaders renamed its southern branch the People's Revolutionary Party. Some but not all of the activists who joined the Front were members of the party.

5. DT interview 43/17/113.
6. In her account of peasant resistance to forced collectivization in the Soviet Union, Lynne Viola argued that rumours became "a form of underground news and dissident social expression", to the point where Soviet authorities "labeled the rumor mill the 'kulak agitprop'" (Viola 1996, pp. 45–46).
7. DT interview 58/10/51.
8. DT interview 9/8/25.
9. DT interview 1/11/64. There were two Thạnh Phú villages in Mỹ Tho province, one in Cai Lậy district and the other in Châu Thành District.
10. DT interview 257/15/19.
11. DT interview 2/8/48.
12. DT interview 112/29/63.
13. DT interviews 28/9/19 and 11/27.
14. DT interview 97/21/36.
15. DT interview 144/73/232.
16. DT interview 176/35/86.
17. For *Tin Tức*, see DT interviews 26/9/(question number illegible), 43/17/112, 57/17/114, and 72/16/56; for *Ấp Bắc*, DT interviews 35/22/64, 45/19/102, 54/6/23, 96/13/32, and 145/22/46; for *Giải Phóng Miền Nam*, DT interviews 2/8/46, 36/13/95–96 and 52/18/104; for *Chiến Thắng*, DT interviews 32/23/132 and 77/17/49; for *Thanh Hải*, DT interview 81/13/28; for *Nhân Dân*, DT interview 96/13/32; and for *Văn Nghệ Mỹ Tho*, DT interview 112/24/53.
18. DT interview 92/6/25.
19. DT interview 145/20/39.
20. DT interviews 15/8/21 and 97/22/39.
21. DT interview 35/11/65.
22. DT interview 35/7/35.
23. DT interview 6/11/97.
24. DT interview 61/19/104.
25. DT interview 17/6/(question number illegible).
26. DT interviews 13/3/8, 21/9/69, 30/13/(question number illegible), 45/19/102 and 57/22/146.
27. DT interview 108/56/71.
28. DT interview 145/22/46.

29. DT interview 285/27/60.
30. DT interview 52/17–18/104.
31. DT interview 237/24/44.
32. DT interview 23/112/71.
33. DT interview 99/31/96.
34. DT interview 133/26/155.
35. DT interview 11/9/23.
36. DT interview 82/8/19. The GVN used the term "ralliers" for people who switched sides, from the NLF side to the GVN side, who "rallied to the just cause".
37. DT interview 26/41–42/56.
38. DT interview 115/8/32.
39. See DT interviews 17/8/(question number illegible), 26/28/38, 88/10/36 and 92/6/25.
40. DT interview 82/7/16.
41. 239/30/16.
42. DT interview 68/35/79.
43. DT interview 285/27/60.
44. DT interview 85/16/30.
45. DT interviews 140/31/71 and 94/17/46. Before the inflation of the late 1960s, the going wage for day labour was forty piasters, which, if multiplied by twenty working days per month, yields an estimate of eight hundred piasters per year.
46. DT interview 13/8/47.
47. DT interview 30/10/(question number illegible).
48. DT interview 61/20/107. RAND transcripts provide about fifty estimates of local radio ownership. Most of these are hamlet assessments, and one might surmise that many of the remaining "village" statistics apply to the informant's hamlet, which he or she might know reasonably well, rather than to the village, with its larger area and thousands of inhabitants. According to this evidence, there were no radios at all in a few locales, and ten radios or less in more than half of the sites. Thirteen other estimates were under thirty, two estimates were for thirty and three estimates for forty. It should be kept in mind that even a hamlet was a relatively large agglomeration. In one of Hiệp Dức's hamlets, where seven radios were reported, there were 142 households (DT interview 42/7/23). Cẩm Sơn seems to have been relatively well provided, with 120 radios according to one informant and "many" according to another (DT interviews 2/6/47 and 69/36/65). One hundred or more radios were noted in just two of the hamlets in Hưng Thạnh Mỹ (DT interview 127/14/49). A comparable number was put forward by an observer in

Hội Cư (DT interview 130/33/60), but that may be an exaggeration, since another informant reported only nine in one Hội Cư hamlet (DT interview 93/7/37). The same overestimation may be the case when someone indicated the presence of more than a hundred radios in Nhị Qúy while another commentator spotted "a few" in his hamlet and still another said there were three or four in his (DT interviews 28/9/21, 16/6/(question number illegible), and 17/7/(question number illegible)). But even the high estimates require an added perspective. There were probably a thousand or more households in Cẩm Sơn and Hưng Thạnh Mỹ, suggesting that only about ten per cent of the population in these villages owned radios.

49. DT interview 18/3/15.
50. DT interview 26/27/(question number illegible).
51. DT interview 66/7/38.
52. DT interview 66/7/38.
53. DT interview 4/16/85.
54. DT interview 1/14/79.
55. DT interview 159/36/73.
56. DT interview 61/20/111.
57. DT interview 23/15/93.
58. DT interview 139/3/14.
59. DT interview 8/16/87.
60. DT interview 69/36/61.
61. DT interview 2/8/47.
62. DT interview 26/42/57.
63. DT interview 203/66/94.
64. DT interview 14/13/23.
65. DT interview 233/100/73.
66. DT interview 10/6/20.
67. DT interview 285/27/60.
68. DT interview 85/33/84.
69. On radio emissions, DT interview 112/25/56; on newspapers, DT interview 38/12/75; on leaflets, DT interview 38/15/86; on GVN propaganda in general, DT interviews 71/10/31 and 99/32/99.
70. DT interview 66/7/39.
71. DT interview 57/21/141.
72. DT interview 83/11/26.
73. DT interview 38/16/90.
74. DT interview 74/20/65.
75. A number of RAND informants reported that planes flew too high to be heard or that the wind or the roar of the engines drowned out the

broadcasters. Responding to this problem, Americans in 1967 introduced "2,100-watt loudspeakers that could be heard in a two-mile radius from altitudes of 3,400 to 4,500 feet" and told crews that "a simple equation of height, wind velocity and known rate of descent allowed reasonably accurate targeting on the ground from high altitudes" (Chandler 1981, pp. 20, 33).

76. DT interviews 194/5/8 and 194/14/22.
77. DT interview 159/32/66.
78. DT interview 154/7/22.
79. DT interview 288/11/19. This was perhaps an intelligence leak anticipating the Tet Offensive.
80. DT interview 166/6/23.
81. DT interview 242/6/13.
82. DT interview 72/16/56.
83. DT interview 147/33/81.
84. DT interview 147/9/27.
85. DT interview 196/10/19.
86. DT interview 199/4/6.
87. DT interview 194/21/40.
88. DT interview 88/3/4.
89. DT interview 216/8/23.
90. It may seem presumptuous to demote a major policy statement of the Communist Party to the status of a rumour. David Elliott notes that Resolution 15 was modified three times between January and May 1959, when party leaders perhaps "reaffirmed" the original text or "may have qualified it, limited it, or even amplified it" (Elliott 2003, p. 228). Given the many gaps and contradictions in the record, "the logical implication", Elliott concludes, is that a summary of the resolution "was not communicated to the provinces or that its contents had been fundamentally changed since May 1959" (ibid., p. 236). This passage, from an outstanding scholar who has relentlessly mined the sources, comes close to saying that we still do not know how Resolution 15 was received in the South.
91. See David Elliott on the "guerrilla theater of posturing and deception" that helped the concerted uprising to gain traction (Elliott 2003, p. 386).
92. DT interview 189/3/7.
93. DT interview 288/2/3.
94. DT interview 135/209/455. "ARVN" was the standard American abbreviation for "Army of the Republic of Vietnam".
95. DT interview 109/23/105.

96. DT interview 109/22/104.
97. DT interview 180/2/6–7.
98. DT interview 134/4/7.
99. DT interview 180/3/8. Note the similarity to the "Great Fear" of July 1789, when word spread with astonishing speed throughout much of rural France that the aristocracy had dispatched mercenaries to put down an incipient revolt. On hearing that "the brigands are coming", peasants armed themselves, built barricades and prepared to fight back, a "general mobilization" that allowed them "to achieve a full realization of their strength" and, soon after, to bring about the "downfall of the seigneurial regime". It "was one of the most important events in French history", Georges Lefebvre declares, and yet "what was the Great Fear if not one gigantic rumour" (Lefebvre 1973, pp. 74, 203, 211).
100. DT interview 233/160/115.
101. DT interview 135/183/391.
102. DT interview 189/3/8.
103. DT interview 185/3/10–11.
104. DT interview 143/8–9/27.
105. DT interview 54/6/23.
106. DT interview 54/6/23.
107. DT interview 70/37/63.
108. DT interview 43/18/114.
109. DT interview 112/25/55.
110. DT interview 164/37–38/122.
111. DT interview 70/4/26.
112. DT interview 60/23/88.
113. Equivalent terms variously translated as "folk music" or "classical music".
114. Vietnamese "reformed theatre" or "reformed opera".
115. DT interviews 146/6/9 and 159/36/73.
116. DT interview 135/199/427. For arguments against *cải lương* and in favour of modern music, see DT interviews 4/16/84, 12/9/24, 19/21/(question number illegible), 26/27/(question number illegible), 137/24/120 and 187/39/172. The Front's ground-level embrace of *cải lương* in the early 1960s calls attention to the relative autonomy of the southern revolution vis-à-vis the Communist Party line. For more on the party's view of *cải lương* and on the post-war efforts to revivify the genre, see the many references in Taylor (2001 and 2003, pp. 138–54).
117. DT interview 32/21/123.
118. DT interview 145/24/48.
119. DT interview 57/12/73.

120. DT interview 79/15/42.
121. DT interview 43/18/118; see also DT interview 9/7/19.
122. DT interview 135/199/427.
123. DT interview 97/20/35.
124. DT interview 165/39/94.
125. DT interview 135/200/429.
126. DT interview 142/76/191.
127. DT interview 24/7/(question number illegible).
128. DT interview 29/5/30 and 29/23/(question number illegible).
129. DT interview 43/18/118.
130. DT interview 65/12/36.
131. DT interview 236/16/75.
132. DT interview 205/64/128.
133. For more on this matter, see Hunt (2002, pp. 79–92).
134. DT interview 69/35/59.
135. DT interview 3/7/43.
136. DT interview 1/15/79.
137. DT interview 79/15/44.
138. DT interview 85/16/30.
139. DT interview 97/20/35.
140. DT interview 139/3/15.
141. DT interview 108/57/74.
142. DT interview 120/25/65.
143. DT interview 203/66/93.
144. DT interview 79/15/45.
145. DT interview 79/16/45.
146. All of the citations in this paragraph are from DT interview 254/8/9.
147. DT interview 197/5–6/16–18.
148. DT interview 269/7/16.
149. DT interview 233/320–321/227.
150. DT interview 291/3/8.
151. Ibid.
152. David Elliott states that in Mỹ Tho the Tet Offensive took the form of "a general uprising". "Nearly the entire rural population of Mỹ Tho — for whatever reasons — was immediately and effectively mobilized in support of the offensive", he declares. "Taxes, which had been increasingly hard [for the NLF] to squeeze out of the peasants, were now paid in advance. Civilian labourers who had evaded the cadres before now performed hazardous duties, sometimes for months on end. Young men who had evaded the draft now signed up in large numbers, as did many women.

Guerrillas who had resisted being sent out of their villages now willingly left for the heavy fighting around Mỹ Tho [city] and the district towns" (Elliott 2003, p. 1044). On "the dual parentage of the Tet Offensive", see also Hunt (2008, pp. 214–21).

153. DT interview 291/3/8.
154. DT interview 291/2/7.

REFERENCES

Auerbach, Jonathan, and Russ Castronovo, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of Propaganda Studies*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.

Buzzanco, Robert, and Marilyn Young. *A Companion to the Vietnam War*. Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 2002.

Chandler, Robert. *War of Ideas: The U.S. Propaganda Campaign in Vietnam.* Boulder, Colorado: Westview, 1981.

Drummond, Lisa, and Mandy Thomas. *Consuming Urban Culture in Contemporary Vietnam*. New York: Routledge, 2003.

Elliott, David. *The Vietnamese War: Revolution and Social Change in the Mekong Delta, 1930–1975.* New York: Sharpe, 2003.

Hunt, David. "The My Tho Grapevine and the Sino-Soviet Split". In *A Companion to the Vietnam War*, edited by Robert Buzzanco and Marilyn Young. Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 2002, pp. 79–92.

———. *Vietnam's Southern Revolution: From Peasant Insurrection to Total War.* Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008.

Lefebvre, Georges. *The Great Fear of 1789: Rural Panic in Revolutionary France*, translated by George Rudé. New York: Pantheon, 1973 [original French edition 1932].

McHale, Shawn. *Print and Power: Confucianism, Communism, and Buddhism in the Making of Modern Vietnam.* Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004.

Peycam, Philippe. *The Birth of Vietnamese Political Journalism: Saigon 1916–1930.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2012.

Race, Jeffrey. *War Comes to Long An: Revolutionary Conflict in a Vietnamese Province.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973.

RAND Corporation, Series DT. *Activities of Viet Cong within Định Tường Province*. RAND Vietnam Interview Series. Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 1972.

Scigliano, Robert. *South Vietnam: Nation under Stress*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, [1963] 1964.

Taylor, Philip. *Fragments of the Present: Searching for Modernity in Vietnam's South*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001.

———. “Digesting Reform: Opera and Cultural Identity in Ho Chi Minh City”. In *Consuming Urban Culture in Contemporary Vietnam*, edited by Lisa Drummond and Mandy Thomas. New York: Routledge, 2003, pp. 138–54.

Viola, Lynne. *Peasant Rebels under Stalin: Collectivization and the Culture of Peasant Resistan*ce. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.