



WHEN INTELLIGENCE MADE A DIFFERENCE

— VIETNAM WAR —

The Seizure of Danang City Hall

by Jim Schnell, Ph.D.

In the United States the 1965-1975 military foray in Vietnam is known as the “Vietnam War.” In Vietnam it is commonly referred to as the “American War.” This article reflects a Vietnamese perspective. It is told from the point of view of Le Cong Co, a Viet Cong sympathizer and activist.¹

In the mid-1960s the North Vietnamese undertook efforts to destabilize the major northern city of Danang with the ultimate goal of overthrowing the South Vietnamese government that the US was working to prop up to ensure the entire country did not succumb to communist rule.

In September, 1964, Le Cong Co was functioning in support of the North Vietnamese government. This put him opposed to U.S. military advisors working in South Vietnam to train South Vietnamese military.

Le Cong Co did not receive detailed guidance with how he was to carry out his duties. This meant much trial and error, learning from mistakes, such as when he misjudged the degree to which he had control over situations and was confronted with and frustrated by unanticipated challenges. One task he learned over time was how to foment dissent in an urban area. He learned to stress three objectives: First, to discourage demonstrators from violence because it was the soldiers who had the weapons. Second, to stress nuance and vagueness rather than clarity regarding who was doing what; for instance, to not use uniforms or insignia that could identify who was functioning in what positions. And, third, to stress moral courage against the military rather than physical action—take the moral high road even if it equates with non-violence.

One of his victories was the occupation of Danang City Hall. The protestors he led held it for nine days. It was an impressive achievement for he was barely 23 years old at that time, and it would have taken considerable planning and insight to succeed with such an objective. But it had less to do with planning and more to do with an intuitive use of HUMINT tactics that made the difference.

The taking of Danang City Hall represented a defining moment for the movement he led in the Danang-Hue area. Hue is a neighboring city. It could have easily never happened at all. The idea of occupying City Hall had never occurred to Le Cong Co or the leadership he guided. Rather, it resulted from the reliable HUMINT network that he had helped build in the city.

Le Cong Co was the primary leader of this event. He operated within a small group of five members who linked with other small cells. The cells were organized in a manner whereby the only people who knew that Le Cong Co was the leader were those in his specific cell.

The scenario began with a march on September 4, 1964 that was planned to protest the Vung Tau Charter, a provisional new constitution, proposed in August, which would allow for American intervention in the conflict between South and North Vietnam.² The march was to be a simple affair near downtown Danang. The intention was to congregate at a local high school, march to the Danang Hotel where American military advisors were lodged, and then return to the high school for a rally and disburse. What actually happened was a different matter.

When the protestors, mostly local university students, arrived at the Danang Hotel they encountered a group of American military advisors having a party, drinking beer and enjoying the company of some local women. It was a small number of military advisors, who were in country to survey the situation and offer advice. (This was before the American military moved into Danang on a large scale on March 8, 1965.) When the U.S. military members observed the protestors, they made light of the protest and threw beer bottles at them. This served as impetus for the protestors to respond in kind, throwing beer bottles back at the Americans. A fight ensued. The Danang Hotel was located in a Catholic neighborhood that was sympathetic to the South Vietnamese government (President Ngo Dinh Diem was Catholic) and residents came out to fight the protesters. A spontaneous street

1. This article is based on a series of interviews with Le Cong Co by the author over a period of several years. As such, this is a personal tale that relies on the memory of the interviewee.

2. The Vung Tau Charter was widely opposed and led to widespread demonstrations throughout South Vietnam.

riot erupted that resulted in the burning of Catholic homes, and the rioters, representing both sides, swelled to over 500 with a couple hundred onlookers.

Le Cong Co and his leadership staff realized they should vacate the area because soldiers would certainly be called in to subdue the violence. They urged the crowd to march back toward the downtown area. While in route, they decided to proceed via Danang City Hall instead of going directly back to the high school from where the march had begun. The intent was to hold a rally at City Hall and then move on to the high school and disperse. However, when the Danang mayor heard about the riot at the Danang Hotel and that the violent mob was marching to City Hall, he fled fearing for his safety.

The abandonment by the Danang mayor and his staff of City Hall posed an opportunity for Le Cong Co and his fellow protestors. Le Cong Co, tipped to the situation by the HUMINT networks that he had helped establish, that included a source inside City Hall. This source, a low-level functionary, quickly conveyed the intelligence about City Hall being abandoned, which allowed Le Cong Co to take advantage of this unanticipated opportunity.

When the large crowd of bold protestors arrived at City Hall they demanded to see the Mayor but their demands fell on deaf ears – City Hall was empty. They then proceeded to occupy City Hall. Protest turned to euphoria as they scrambled to take control of the city, managing city operations to include the flow of traffic, the maintenance of food distribution, trash removal and public safety.

The occupiers were aware the military could be called in at any time to put down the disturbance and re-take City Hall. To be forewarned of such a move they brought women from nearby rural areas to man various checkpoints throughout the city, and they stationed local elderly women in this capacity as well. The assumption was that in a largely Buddhist country the military would not attack women, especially elderly women, because social norms would not allow such assaults. The plan worked.

The use of these women was an effective HUMINT strategy in that they typically knew each other and established clear means for passing intelligence along regarding police and military troop movements. The elderly women especially did not draw suspicion as being intelligence functionaries.

Le Cong Co muses today about how the magic of the moment spawned a wide range of ideas regarding what the next step should be. This event was over 50 years ago but the video of our interview about it

reflects his animation and engagement. It is a vivid memory for him.

All kinds of ideas were entertained. One plan called for having Danang withdraw from the country of Vietnam and be an independent city-state much like Singapore. However, on September 13, the South Vietnamese government sent the military into Danang and forcibly removed the protesters from City Hall.

It was a bloody affair in the streets and in City Hall. Le Cong Co tells how the elderly women, armed only with umbrellas, fought the soldiers. The occupation of City Hall had lasted nine days. The female HUMINT teams disappeared from the streets, and Le Cong Co blended into the populace without his leadership role being revealed.

This was a time of great learning for Le Cong Co and his colleagues. What they learned proved beneficial when the stakes were higher after the invasion by American military less than six months later. After March 8, 1965 when the U.S. military landed in Danang traditional Vietnamese decorum protocols gave way to bold acts of insurrection and vengeance.

When the Marines landed Le Cong Co moved to the historic city of Hue about 80 miles from Danang. There he continued his efforts to recruit support for the North Vietnamese cause and organize destabilization efforts.

After the American War, Le Cong Co had a distinguished career in Vietnamese government service and academia. But it was marked by accusations of being a CIA spy, predicated on his many close escapes from the Americans. He was cleared of all charges in 1981 after 30,000 pages of documents were found in the former U.S. Embassy in Saigon that detailed various US activities in Vietnam. He later served as a senator in Hanoi and influenced the evolution of the Vietnamese economy from a central-planning model to a market-oriented model. In 1992, Le Cong Co was central to the establishment of Duy Tan University, a private university in Danang and has served as its president and provost. During a 2013 interview, Le Cong Co, ever a nationalist, offered his thoughts on how the Vietnamese-American War occurred:

American participation in the War was a mistake. Indeed America was not a country that wanted to conquer Vietnam. To Americans, the main issue in Asia was the Chinese. That is the balance of power, not just in Southeast Asia and Asia, but globally. The Vietnamese-American War occurred against the desires of the Vietnamese and American people.³

3. Lillie, A. *Vietnam's Forgotten Revolutionaries: Student Voices from*

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Inside the Vietnamese Revolution, 1954-1975. Unpublished M.A. Thesis. University of Washington, 2014, p. 78.

Counterintelligence

Legends naturally surround all “secret service.” Its very name inspires fear and distrust and stimulates men’s imagination. It is believed to be wise and wicked, efficient and powerful.

— Lewis Namier
British historian

If you control counterintelligence,
you control the intelligence service.

— James Angleton

“A Wilderness of Mirrors”

That myriad of stratagems, deceptions, artifices, and all the other devices of disinformation which the Soviet bloc and its coordinated intelligence services use to confuse and split the West, producing an ever-fluid landscape where fact and illusion merge.

— James Angleton