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Source: *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations*, 2014, Vol. 21, No. 1 (2014), pp. 34-57

Published by: Brill

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JOURNAL OF AMERICAN-EAST ASIAN RELATIONS

21 (2014) 34-57

THE JOURNAL OF
AMERICAN-EAST ASIAN
RELATIONS
brill.com/jaer

'Before It Is Too Late': Land Reform in South Vietnam, 1956–1968

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Abstract

Attempts by the U.S. government to enact land redistribution in the Republic of Vietnam began in the mid-1950s. At that time, land reform was a linchpin of U.S. foreign policy in Asia. Wolf Ladejinsky, author of the legislation that had virtually eliminated tenancy in occupied Japan, encountered political controversy in Washington and administrative challenges in Saigon in his attempt to bring about greater equality of land ownership in South Vietnam. This initial attempt to modify land tenure arrangements failed when redistribution stalled, far from complete, during 1961. Although new land reform legislation did not appear until 1970, the 1960s were by no means years of inaction on land reform. Years of behind-the-scenes efforts by American policymakers in Washington and Saigon culminated in the Land-to-the-Tiller Law, an ambitious but doomed attempt to complete the work that Ladejinsky had begun over a decade earlier. Documents from the Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library, many newly declassified, suggest that bureaucratic intrigue and political infighting within the Johnson administration and Congress both hindered and facilitated the emergence of a new land reform program in war-ravaged South Vietnam.

Keywords

South Vietnam – land ownership – land reform – land redistribution – Wolf Ladejinsky – Lyndon B. Johnson – Robert Komer

The Republic of Vietnam was born at a propitious moment in the history of land reform.¹ In the mid-1950s, agricultural redistribution had broad support within the U.S. foreign policy establishment. Policymakers and academics believed that landowners were more productive cultivators than tenants, and they feared the revolutionary potential of landless peasants. The administrators of occupied Japan designed an ambitious program that virtually eliminated tenancy there by 1949. Moreover, soon afterward Chiang Kai-shek and his American allies used land reform to help solidify the Guomindang's rule in Taiwan. A University of Wisconsin land tenure conference in 1951 gave scholars from five continents a platform to discuss land ownership patterns around the world. The Truman administration sent representatives to the conference and expressed its view that "there is no more urgent problem" for the majority of the world's population than "antiquated systems of land ownership."² When the 1954 Geneva Conference brought South Vietnam into existence, land reform was a hot topic in American policy circles and a rite of passage for developing nations allied to the United States.

Land reform in South Vietnam would prove difficult to achieve, but not for lack of interest on the American side. Efforts persisted, erratically, from the beginning of country's existence until the end. Ngo Dinh Diem, who held the presidency from 1955 until his assassination in 1963, weakened key portions of Washington's initial redistribution plan. Under that law, known as Ordinance 57, Diem's government seized formerly French-owned lands, redistributed some of the country's tenanted acreage, and capped the amount of farmland that individuals could own and rent out. Yet the program lapsed into disuse after only a few years. This first shot at land reform ended partly because Vietnamese and American policymakers turned their attention to other rural reorganization schemes such as agrovilles and strategic hamlets. After the failure of these experiments and the escalation of U.S. war efforts in Vietnam after 1965, personnel changes in Washington and bipartisan congressional pressure generated a second push for land reform that culminated in the Land-to-the-Tiller Law of 1970.

Scholars of U.S. policy in South Vietnam have touched but lightly on the agricultural reform efforts of the 1950s and 1960s, perhaps because the

1 This paper will use the terms "land reform," "agricultural reform," and "agrarian reform" interchangeably to avoid repetition. Also, each of these terms will refer to changes in tenancy arrangements, especially the redistribution of farmland. Unless specifically stated otherwise, they do not refer to other kinds of rural reforms, such as expanded irrigation systems, improved crop strains, and strengthened credit institutions.

2 Press release, 9 October 1951, folder "Foreign Relations – Land reform proposals," box 60, George M. Elsey Papers, Harry S. Truman Library, Independence, MO.

Communist redistribution programs appear more noteworthy in light of the war's outcome. Frances FitzGerald with her remarkable 1972 *Fire in the Lake* is an exception, yet even she underestimates the extent to which American officials genuinely desired land redistribution in the 1950s and 1960s. Because of this, she provides few details about the personnel, congress members, and researchers who worked behind the scenes to bring about greater equalization of land ownership in South Vietnam.³ Another notable exception is Mark Moyar, who in his *Triumph Forsaken* calls land reform and Ordinance 57 "among the most significant achievements of Diem's early Presidency," despite Diem's personal feelings on the matter. Moyar records that when Diem's American advisors expressed their desire for a strict upper limit on land ownership in keeping with the Japanese land reform, Diem argued that such a restriction would "eliminate my middle class." Moyar criticizes the U.S. government for providing only a fraction of the funds for the program's implementation.⁴ Gabriel Kolko's *Anatomy of a War* offers a useful counterpoint to Moyar's arguably overly optimistic view of Ordinance 57's effects. He points out that government officials and their families had the pick of the best land subject to redistribution, whereas landlords who wished to circumvent the law could simply divvy up their acreage among family members or bribe corrupt administrators. Kolko properly highlights the weaknesses of the 1956 law, but his discussion of official American attitudes on land reform in the following decade contains errors. In particular, his view of presidential advisor Robert Komer's role requires closer scrutiny.⁵

Although FitzGerald, Moyar, and Kolko devote just a few pages out of hundreds to this important aspect of U.S. policy in South Vietnam, their works are more far sustained treatments than most. Charles Stuart Callison examines the results of the Land-to-the-Tiller Law, which was far more radical than Ordinance 57 and aimed to eradicate tenancy entirely. Yet Callison does not explain how the law came into being or how it fits within the larger context of American land reform policies in South Vietnam.⁶ Eric Bergerud helpfully covers the Viet Cong's land redistribution policies, but does not analyze

3 Frances FitzGerald, *Fire in the Lake* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1972).

4 Mark Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954–1965* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 72–73.

5 Gabriel Kolko, *Vietnam: Anatomy of a War, 1940–1975* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1986), 94, 244.

6 Charles Stuart Callison, *Land to the Tiller in the Mekong Delta: Economic, Social, and Political Effects of Land Reform in Four Villages of South Vietnam* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1983).

Washington's and Saigon's programs.⁷ James Trullinger shares fascinating first-hand observations of village culture during the war, but does not engage with policy debates.⁸ James Carter's excellent work on nation building in South Vietnam in the 1950s and 1960s highlights the role of American policymakers in promoting economic development, but discussions of land reform are curiously absent.⁹

Land reform in South Vietnam is an issue of much greater significance than the limited treatments of the subject indicate. In many ways, it is the final chapter in a longer, broader story of postwar agrarian reform in non-Communist Asia. The fact that land reform remained a salient and controversial issue throughout the brief existence of the Republic of Vietnam is a powerful reminder of land reform's central importance in understanding U.S.-Asian relations during the middle of the 20th Century. Perhaps no one could claim to know more about U.S. land reform policies toward Asia between the 1930s and the 1970s, than Wolf Isaac Ladejinsky. Ladejinsky was instrumental in designing the land reform program that the United States enacted during the occupation of Japan. He was modest about the role he played there, preferring to give credit to General Douglas MacArthur's "strong support" for the program and the Japanese government's cooperative implementation of it.¹⁰ But during every stage of the process Ladejinsky's ideas "focused the otherwise formless general discussion" on land reform into a concrete plan of action.¹¹ His achievements in Japan in the late 1940s ultimately led to his assignment to Saigon in January 1955, but not before Cold War politics threatened to end his career.

One of Ladejinsky's friends and colleagues from the occupation years remembered him as a "slight, gray-templed ... pipe-smoker ... with a soft-spoken, charming, continental manner and intriguing Russian accent."¹²

7 Eric M. Bergerud, *The Dynamics of Defeat: The Vietnam War in Hau Nghia Province* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991).

8 James Trullinger, *Village at War: An Account of Conflict in Vietnam* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994).

9 James Carter, *Inventing Vietnam: The United States and State Building, 1954–1968* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

10 Wolf I. Ladejinsky, "Land Reform in Japan: A Comment," in Kenneth H. Parsons, Raymond J. Penn, and Philip M. Raup, eds., *Land Tenure: Proceedings of the International Conference on Land Tenure and Related Problems in World Agriculture, Held at Madison, Wisconsin, 1951* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1956), 225.

11 Theodore Cohen with Herbert Passin, ed., *Remaking Japan: The American Occupation as New Deal* (New York: Free Press, 1987), 38.

12 *Ibid.*, 37.

That accent was a source of concern for the “introverted and hypersensitive” Ladejinsky. He predicted, before receiving his assignment to Tokyo, that the U.S. government would “never let me be an American official abroad with my Russian accent and birth. ... They just wouldn’t listen to me there.”¹³ More than one acquaintance remarked on Ladejinsky’s penchant for pessimism, but it was not always misplaced.

Ladejinsky was born in rural Ukraine in 1899 to a Jewish family with “rather extensive flour-milling and timber interests.”¹⁴ In 1919, his brother was killed and his family’s property was confiscated during the Soviet annexation of Ukraine.¹⁵ After living for a while under Communist rule, Ladejinsky “ran across the frozen Dniester River” and crossed into Romania under cover of night, leaving his parents and several sisters behind. Two years later, with, as he remembered, “no money, no friends and not knowing the language,” he immigrated to New York City. He became a U.S. citizen and worked as a window washer, tailor, and newspaper peddler while taking night courses at City College of New York. Ladejinsky soon learned enough English to enroll in a graduate program at Columbia University, which granted him a degree in agricultural economics in 1928. He later secured a job with the U.S. Department of Agriculture thanks to the patronage of his former professor Rexford Tugwell, a member of President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s “Brain Trust.” In 1945, Ladejinsky coauthored a planning guide for the U.S. occupation of Japan that earned him a ticket to Tokyo to serve as special adviser to MacArthur. The “short, intense, scholarly man” with a “weak stomach” and a hatred of Communists had become an American land reform expert in East Asia.¹⁶ After designing Japan’s land redistribution program, he got involved with similar projects in South Korea and Taiwan.

Ladejinsky’s prediction that his immigrant background would preclude his assignment to Japan was wrong in 1945, but nine years later the prophecy of negative repercussions came true. In late 1954, Ladejinsky was working for the State Department as an agricultural attaché in Tokyo when a bureaucratic shakeup transferred all agricultural policy personnel from the State Department to the Agriculture Department. Despite Ladejinsky’s anti-Communist credentials, his numerous governmental service awards, his professional association

13 Ibid., 39.

14 Wolf Ladejinsky, “Self-description/Appraisal,” in Louis J. Walinsky, ed., *Agrarian Reform as Unfinished Business: The Selected Papers of Wolf Ladejinsky* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 289.

15 Louis J. Walinsky, “Introduction,” in *Agrarian Reform as Unfinished Business*, 4.

16 “The Administration: Odd Man Out,” *Time*, 3 January 1955; Cohen, *Remaking Japan*, p. 25.

with anti-Communist icons MacArthur and Chiang, and his previous employment with the Agriculture Department, his appointment was rejected. The Agriculture Department's security chief claimed that Ladejinsky was not sufficiently familiar with "American farming operations and problems" to work for the department. The department further alleged that Ladejinsky was a risk to security because he had relatives in the Soviet Union, had taken a trip in the 1930s to visit family there, and had once belonged to "two Communist-front organizations." Ladejinsky denied this last of these allegations. Influential friends such as author James Michener and the U.S. Ambassador to Japan spoke openly in Ladejinsky's defense. A public outcry ensued in which Ladejinsky's supporters accused the Agriculture Department of stupidity, at least, and anti-Semitism at worst. Newspapers around the country picked up the story, and political cartoonists sided with Ladejinsky. Secretary of Agriculture Ezra Taft Benson phoned Secretary of State John Foster Dulles to express his concern that the press coverage showed "a split between Agriculture and State," but the Agriculture Department refused to reverse its decision.¹⁷

In the end, Agriculture's loss was South Vietnam's gain. *Time* magazine, operating under the dominance of noted anti-Communist and Asia-watcher Henry Luce, tracked the Ladejinsky story closely and reported that President Dwight D. Eisenhower was "embarrassed and angry" about Agriculture's decision.¹⁸ In early January 1955, the Foreign Operations Administration hired Ladejinsky "at his previous salary" and assigned him to an advisory position in Saigon. *Time* predicted that Ladejinsky soon would replicate his previous achievements. "Ladejinsky, who planned the U.S.-sponsored land reforms in Japan that gave 3,000,000 peasant families their own farms, will blueprint similar reforms to win South Viet Nam's peasants away from Communism before next year's elections," the magazine exulted.¹⁹ The ever-worried Ladejinsky may not have been so certain. Speaking at the University of Wisconsin's land

17 "The Administration: Odd Man Out," *Time*, 3 January 1955; "The Administration: The Tricky Gooch Syndrome," *Time*, 10 January 1955; Telephone Call from Secretary Ezra Taft Benson, 23 December 1954, folder "Telephone Conv-General Nov. 1, 1954–December 31, 1954 (1)," Telephone Calls Series, box 3, John Foster Dulles Papers, Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, Abilene, KS (hereafter DDEL).

18 On Henry Luce's support for U.S. anti-Communist interventions in Asia, see for example Robert Herzstein, *Henry R. Luce, Time, and the American Crusade in Asia* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

19 "The Administration: Back to Work," *Time*, 17 January 1955; Hubert Humphrey to President Dwight D. Eisenhower, 13 January 1955, folder "Security and Loyalty Program of Government Employees, Ladejinsky, Wolf," Official File, 1953–1961, White House Central Files, box 415, DDEL.

tenure conference in 1951, he had cautioned that conditions in occupied Japan were different from those in Latin America, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia. But, he acknowledged, because “Communists are masters at exploiting agrarian discontent,” there was no choice but to press for land reform in areas of rural inequality “before it is too late.”²⁰

Diem, at the urging of French and American advisers, had taken some tentative steps to ease tenants’ burdens before the arrival of the famous expert from Washington. Years of warfare in Vietnam had caused many French and Vietnamese landlords to flee the countryside. The pro-independence Viet Minh fighting force had redistributed much of the abandoned land. As a result, the Viet Minh, now governing North Vietnam and competing with Diem for the loyalty of the Vietnamese people, enjoyed great popularity in many rural areas in the South. In areas where landlords remained relatively well entrenched and constituted a “truly conservative force,” such as the fertile Mekong Delta, roughly 600,000 tenants, or two-thirds of farm families, cultivated around 80 percent of the arable land. The Viet Minh land reform efforts had made little progress there, and tenants still suffered from rents as high as fifty percent of crop yield, high interest rates on borrowed money and equipment, and the threat of eviction at the whim of landlords. To redress the situation, Diem announced policies that capped agricultural rents at 25 percent of the cultivator’s crop, limited the interest rates landlords could charge on loans, and made it more difficult for them to terminate tenant leases. FitzGerald records that Diem’s first land law “was so poorly designed and so badly implemented” that “very little land actually changed hands” as a result.²¹ Kolko observes that many tenants viewed Diem’s policies with fear and skepticism, since the laws might have emboldened absentee landlords who had ceased collecting rents during the recent conflict to return to the countryside and reimpose the terms of their leases.²²

Ladejinsky arrived in Saigon soon after these policies took effect. He found a government “struggling for its life” and an agricultural reform effort striving just to get off the ground. Diem’s agricultural reforms, already very modest

20 Ladejinsky, “Land Reform in Japan,” in *Land Tenure*, pp. 228–29.

21 FitzGerald, *Fire in the Lake*, pp. 102–03, 154; Stanford Research Institute, *Land Reform in Vietnam Working Papers*, Vol. I, Part 1: *Legal Framework and Program Status* (Menlo Park, CA: Stanford Research Institute, 1968), 24–25; Wolf Ladejinsky, “Agrarian Reform in the Republic of Vietnam,” in Wesley R. Fishel, ed. *Problems of Freedom: South Vietnam Since Independence* (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1961), 155–56.

22 Kolko, *Vietnam: Anatomy of a War*, p. 93.

compared to what had taken place in Japan and elsewhere, had encountered immediate opposition. Powerful landlords opposed the new restrictions on their livelihood, while farmers who had received land from the Viet Minh feared that the new laws would encourage absentee landlords to return and reimpose rents.²³ Even tenants who had not received land from the Viet Minh and thus stood to benefit from the new policies exhibited, Ladejinsky reported, a “disturbing” and “lukewarm attitude toward the program” because they believed, with good reason, that the Viet Minh and their southern offshoot the Viet Cong would offer better terms than Diem’s government.²⁴ Ladejinsky also bemoaned the lack of “administrative machinery” at the federal, provincial, and local levels. Because of these problems, he reported, Diem’s reforms had gotten off “to a very slow start.”²⁵ Ladejinsky set to work designing a comprehensive rural reform program that ultimately took shape as Ordinance 57.

Promulgated on 22 October 1956, Ordinance 57 was South Vietnam’s most ambitious piece of land reform legislation until the 1970s Land-to-the-Tiller Law. By creating a method for the transference of land ownership from landlords to cultivators, it far exceeded Diem’s earlier policies of rent control and interest reduction. Under Ordinance 57, the government of South Vietnam would purchase all landlord-owned lands in excess of 100 hectares (1 hectare is about 2.5 acres), not counting a maximum of fifteen hectares “for the continuation of ancestor worship and the expenses it entails.”²⁶ Landlords could continue to lease up to seventy of their one hundred hectares. The government would determine the value of any excess land and pay the landlord ten percent in cash and the balance in twelve-year bonds bearing three percent interest. The government would sell the land, at the purchase price, to the tenants currently working it. If the land had no tenants or the tenants did not wish to buy it, war veterans and landless refugees could purchase it instead. Buyers had six years to pay for the land in full, and they could not lease it to other cultivators within the first ten years of ownership. The responsibility for implementing the land reform fell to local committees, but the central government would have final say over land prices to ensure they remained low enough for

23 Ibid; Ladejinsky, “Agrarian Reform in the Republic of Vietnam,” in *Problems of Freedom*, p. 160.

24 Wolf Ladejinsky, “Field Trip Operations in Central Vietnam,” in *Agrarian Reform as Unfinished Business*, pp. 223–224.

25 Ladejinsky, “Agrarian Reform in the Republic of Vietnam,” in *Problems of Freedom*, p. 160.

26 Ibid., p. 166.

cash-strapped tenants to afford.²⁷ Washington would help fund the program, but Diem's government footed most of the bill.²⁸

Ladejinsky never touted his authorship of Ordinance 57, preferring to cast it as a Diem achievement, but in all essentials the law reveals his handiwork. The collector of Ladejinsky's selected papers notes that Ordinance 57 exhibits the same "characteristic Ladejinsky hallmarks" found in the Japanese land reform, including the "painstaking determination of the acreage subject to redistribution, the determination of land purchase prices which would at once be fair to the owners and feasible for the tenant buyers, and the creation of provincial and local committees to supervise and administer the program."²⁹ In another telltale sign of Ladejinsky's authorship, the Ordinance encouraged landlords to trade the bonds they received in payment for shares in state-created enterprises. This tactic to enlist landlord support for industrialization was a key feature of land reform efforts in Taiwan.³⁰

However, Ladejinsky was not at all satisfied with Ordinance 57 and had not exerted final authority over its contents. His personal papers reveal several points of contention between him and Diem. First, Ladejinsky believed that the six-year schedule of payment was unrealistic. He argued that a "ten-year period was a more sober reflection of the tenant's financial position."³¹ Second, the maximum of one hundred hectares was many times larger than what Ladejinsky had advocated in Japan. The limit there had been closer to five hectares, the amount the Viet Cong later would set in its redistribution programs.³² In early October 1956, Ladejinsky suggested to Diem a maximum withholding of 75 or fifty hectares, and he surely would have preferred an even smaller number to ensure that more land would be available for redistribution.³³ Third, Ladejinsky was unhappy that the law allowed landlords to continue leasing seventy percent of their land. This loophole meant that less than one third of the country's total tenanted acreage was available for redistribution, and that approximately "two-thirds of the tenants [would]

27 Ibid.

28 Stanford Research Institute, *Land Reform in Vietnam Working Papers*, Vol. II: *Administration of Land Affairs* (Menlo Park, CA: Stanford Research Institute, 1968), 92.

29 Louis J. Walinsky, "The Vietnam Years, 1955–1961," in *Agrarian Reform as Unfinished Business*, p. 216.

30 Ladejinsky, "Agrarian Reform in the Republic of Vietnam," in *Problems of Freedom*, p. 166.

31 Ibid., p. 169.

32 William Bredo, "Agrarian Reform in Vietnam: Vietcong and Government of Vietnam Strategies in Conflict," *Asian Survey* 10, no. 8 (August 1970), 748.

33 Wolf Ladejinsky, "Making the Pending Land Redistribution Program More Practicable," in *Agrarian Reform as Unfinished Business*, p. 272.

remain tenants.”³⁴ Ladejinsky reminded Diem that any successful reform “must apply to the great majority of the tenants” if it expected “to achieve economic and political stability in the countryside.”³⁵ Fourth, Ordinance 57 left unresolved the status of roughly 245,000 hectares of former French-owned lands. Fifth and most frustrating to Ladejinsky was the slow pace of redistribution “compared with ... Japan and Formosa.”³⁶ Although in public Ladejinsky put a positive spin on the law he had helped to create, he clearly had recognized Ordinance 57’s shortcomings and had tried, unsuccessfully, to avert them. Diem had decided that Ladejinsky’s proposals were too radical.

The editor of Ladejinsky’s selected papers believes that “some time in 1959 he became progressively more disillusioned with the evolution of events in Vietnam and with the prospects for his further useful service there.”³⁷ In 1961, he left the country and ended his long and influential career in the U.S. government. He spent a few years researching Nepalese agriculture for the Ford Foundation before joining the World Bank as an agricultural development expert. He was studying agrarian issues relating to the Indian subcontinent when he died in July 1975.

Ordinance 57 remained the law of the land in Vietnam for well over a decade, but its weaknesses were substantial and it fell into disuse after the first five years. That it failed to achieve its ends was largely due to the changes Diem had made to Ladejinsky’s draft and his government’s failure to carry out in full faith even the weakened version. Only an estimated ten percent of South Vietnamese tenant families gained title to the land they tilled as a result of Ordinance 57.³⁸ Yet the policy had not entirely failed to produce results, as its later critics alleged and as historians’ virtual silence on it may suggest.³⁹ Under the terms of the Ordinance, the government purchased 428,445

34 Ladejinsky, “Agrarian Reform in the Republic of Vietnam,” in *Problems of Freedom*, p. 172.

35 Ladejinsky, “Making the Pending Land Redistribution Program More Practicable,” in *Agrarian Reform as Unfinished Business*, 272.

36 Ladejinsky, “Agrarian Reform in the Republic of Vietnam,” in *Problems of Freedom*, pp. 170–71.

37 Louis J. Walinsky, “The Vietnam Years,” in Walinsky, *Agrarian Reform as Unfinished Business*, p. 216.

38 Roy L. Prosterman, “Land-to-the-Tiller in South Vietnam: The Tables Turn,” in “Vietnam: Politics, Land Reform, and Development in the Countryside,” *Asian Survey* 10, no. 8 (August 1970), 755.

39 William Bredo, Director of Development Economics and Agroindustries at the Stanford Research Institute, and James L. Tyson, a private sector economist, were among those later analysts who dismissed Ordinance 57 on the presumption that it evinced no genuine reformist intent. George McTurnan Kahin is representative of the many historians whose detailed accounts of the Diem period do not include treatments of this law.

hectares out of a possible 454,504 subject to redistribution, not counting former French-owned lands that the government had seized but that the law did not address. By 1961, local committees had sold nearly sixty percent of the land the government had purchased. Taking former French lands into account, however, the amount of government-owned land sold to tenants and other qualified buyers fell to forty percent.⁴⁰ Moyer is a rarity among historians in expressing an optimistic view of the Ordinance's accomplishments. "Diem's land reform did succeed in breaking up the vast estates in the delta," he concludes, and "the Communists would later lament that this redistribution of land 'seriously interfered' with their subsequent efforts to win over the peasantry through land reform."⁴¹ Simply put, Moyer concludes that the law had worked as far as it went. Ordinance 57 had demonstrated the potential benefits of land redistribution in South Vietnam, but the process remained far from complete as the nation entered the tumultuous decade of the 1960s.

"It is rather striking," William Bredo, Director of Development Economics and Agroindustries at the Stanford Research Institute, wrote in 1970, "that throughout the entire period from 1960 to 1965 under the Kennedy and early Johnson Administrations, no support whatever, either financial or in terms of advisory assistance, was given to the Government of Vietnam to help carry through this most fundamental of social measures." He was referring, of course, to land reform. Bredo had traveled to South Vietnam to direct a study that the Johnson administration had commissioned, returning as a passionate advocate for land redistribution in the beleaguered country. He repudiated the inaction of the early 1960s as well as the inadequacy of the Diem-era reform. In his view, Vietnam required a "drastic change" from the "out-of-date 1956 Ordinance 57," which he thought was inexcusably weak in comparison with the policies of "all [other] countries that had conducted land reform programs in Asia."⁴²

Strangely, Bredo and other analysts blamed the neglect of the early 1960s on political conservatism within the U.S. government. According to Bredo, "the forces who preferred the status quo" were "in the ascendancy." The U.S. government believed that "any real progress in completing the land redistribution already enacted" would alienate "the landlords and ... the army officers who

40 William Bredo, "Agrarian Reform in Vietnam: Vietcong and Government of Vietnam Strategies in Conflict," in "Vietnam: Politics, Land Reform, and Development in the Countryside," p. 742.

41 Moyer, *Triumph Forsaken*, p. 73.

42 Bredo, "Agrarian Reform in Vietnam," p. 744.

came largely from the landed class.”⁴³ Roy L. Prosterman, a law professor who worked with Bredo, singled out “lower-echelon” officials in the U.S. Embassy in Saigon who stymied reform.⁴⁴ James Tyson, a private sector economist, asserted that American reform experts in the late 1950s and early 1960s intentionally avoided antagonizing the landlord class “whom they considered the last bastions of stability in an already war-torn country.”⁴⁵ Robert Sansom, a member of National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger’s staff in the early 1970s, was less specific but no more correct when he wrote that “[t]he basic reason land reform was not pursued [in the early 1960s] was that U.S. officials did not believe that land-based grievances were important.”⁴⁶ Even Frances FitzGerald, writing in 1972, claimed that after the failure of the 1956 law, “sheer apathy about the subject” of land reform meant that “American officials did not renew their efforts for another fourteen years.” In fact, the official hiatus was far shorter than FitzGerald realized. Her somewhat contradictory assertion that “the issue remained alive in official circles in Washington” is a more accurate summary of the period between the lapse of Ordinance 57 and the passage of the Land-to-the-Tiller Law in 1970.⁴⁷

The history of Ordinance 57 makes it difficult to believe that the United States subsequently neglected land reform because it had become more solicitous of landlord support. Political fragility, which Ladejinsky observed in abundance when he arrived in Saigon, did not give him pause about the need for quick and thoroughgoing reform. On the contrary, from the late 1940s onward, U.S. policymakers had promoted land redistribution specifically in areas they believed were vulnerable to Communist insurgencies. Ordinance 57’s weaknesses did not reflect a change of policy in Washington, but instead resulted from Diem’s decision not to follow his American advisers’ recommendations. Pressure from large and absentee landowners may well have influenced Diem’s political calculus, but it had no discernible impact on Ladejinsky.

Even during the first half of the 1960s, the theory that Washington prized stability in the South Vietnamese countryside over radical change does not survive close scrutiny. To the contrary, many officials believed that sweeping

43 Ibid., p. 743.

44 Prosterman, “Land-to-the-Tiller,” p. 756. As this paper will show, the U.S. Embassy was indeed reluctant to pursue land reform, but not primarily because of landlord pressure.

45 James L. Tyson, “Land Reform in Vietnam: A Progress Report,” *Asian Affairs* 1, no. 1 (September–October, 1973), 33.

46 Robert L. Sansom, *The Economics of Insurgency in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1970), 229; Prosterman, “Land-to-the-Tiller,” p. 751.

47 FitzGerald, *Fire in the Lake*, p. 151.

agrarian reorganization was a prerequisite to the achievement of security, political stability, and economic development. This was the thinking behind the agrovillage project of 1959–1960 and the subsequent Strategic Hamlet Program of the early 1960s. Unlike land reform, in which farmers ideally remain in place, the agrovillage initiative required relocations of whole hamlets and villages to areas the Diem government considered easier to defend and develop. Forced conscription into construction crews, for which laborers received little or no financial compensation, engendered deep resentment among the rural population. Instead of empowering cultivators and strengthening farmers' control over their land, which presumably was a central objective of land reform, agrovillages placed onerous burdens on the peasantry and increased the power of the central government at the expense of localities. While the land reform law of 1956 languished for lack of attention, the agrovillage program imposed "enormous" political costs on the Diem government.⁴⁸

The Strategic Hamlet Program continued the policy of forcible relocations, while creating new opportunities for Saigon to extend its control into rural areas.⁴⁹ The scheme provided for the appointment of local politicians close to Diem, the construction of fortified perimeters, and the deforestation of wilderness areas that the Viet Cong might use as cover and concealment. The U.S. government had had little to do with the short-lived agrovillages, but for Strategic Hamlets there were "many enthusiastic advocates on the American side."⁵⁰ Historian Michael Latham views strategic hamlets as a modernization effort that aimed to create tightly-managed communities where peasants could avail themselves of governmental services, schools, hospitals, and clean wells.⁵¹ This experiment, which lasted only a little longer than the agrovillages and proved equally unsuccessful, shows that policymakers in the early 1960s were willing to engage in sweeping rural reorganization to achieve long-range political and economic goals.

Some American officials continued to fly the flag for land reform during the period after Ordinance 57 had fallen into disuse and before the push for a new, stronger law began in earnest. Scholar George McTurnan Kahin ascribes pro-redistribution sentiments to Colonel Sam Wilson and Lieutenant Colonel John Paul Vann, writing that both felt "intensely frustrated over their helplessness in getting" local-level South Vietnamese military and political officials "to carry

48 Moyer, *Triumph Forsaken*, pp. 82, 158–59.

49 FitzGerald, *Fire in the Lake*, p. 123.

50 *Ibid.*, pp. 156–58.

51 Michael Latham, *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and "Nation Building" in the Kennedy Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

out the U.S.-supported agrarian reform program, which still existed largely on paper.” According to Kahin, who knew both Wilson and Vann, both men “complained that because these officials themselves had a vested interest in continuation of the existing exploitative pattern of agrarian relationships, it was impossible to secure their cooperation in implementing the regulations.”⁵² In other words, the problem was not so much U.S. passivity as it was anti-reform impulses on the part of the South Vietnamese government and military. This was the same dynamic that had earlier led to Diem’s rejection of Ladejinsky’s most radical proposals.

Land reform never had disappeared entirely from American policymakers’ consciousness, so no single moment heralded its resurrection as a major priority for them. Contemporary participants pointed to a number of events as the most significant. Bredo lauded the arrival in 1965 of a small team of land reform specialists to the Vietnam bureau of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).⁵³ These advisers were the first American personnel to deal exclusively with Vietnamese land reform since Wolf Ladejinsky had left the country in 1961. With their arrival, USAID’s budget for land reform activities rose from literally nothing during the years 1961 to 1965 to \$14,000 in fiscal year 1966. This was a pittance compared to the over \$3.5 million USAID had spent on land reform in South Vietnam between 1955 and 1960, but it signaled a fresh start.⁵⁴ MacDonald Salter, USAID’s “best fellow” on land reform according to one official, thought the promulgation of Vietnam’s new constitution in April 1967 was an even more important landmark.⁵⁵ Two articles in the new constitution indicated the government’s desire to resume the expropriation and redistribution of farmland, and, for Salter, these provisions “marked the beginning of a new period in the history of land reform” in the country.⁵⁶ Prosterman agreed with Salter that the initiative for a new program “came from the Vietnamese,” but selected a speech that President Nguyen Van Thieu delivered

52 George McTurnan Kahin, *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam* (New York: Knopf, 1986), 411–12.

53 Bredo, “Agrarian Reform in Vietnam,” 743; Stanford Research Institute, *Land Reform in Vietnam Working Papers*, Vol. II, p. 94.

54 Stanford Research Institute, *Land Reform in Vietnam Working Papers*, Vol. II, p. 92.

55 Marshall Wright to Walt W. Rostow, 10 September 1968, Vietnam Country File (hereafter Vietnam), box 58, National Security File (hereafter NSF), Lyndon B. Johnson Library (hereafter LBJL).

56 “Land Reform Provisions of New Constitution,” box 61, *ibid.*; MacDonald Salter, “The Broadening Base of Land Reform in South Vietnam,” in “Vietnam: Politics, Land Reform, and Development in the Countryside,” p. 728.

in January 1968 to illustrate his point.⁵⁷ FitzGerald wrote of the “liberal journalists, social scientists, and congressmen” who “brought pressure upon the U.S. mission every year to implement a new land law.” These people were indeed important catalysts, but she does not provide specifics nor credit the U.S. officials in Saigon and Washington who ultimately backed the calls for a new program.⁵⁸

None of these explanations tell the full story how land reform got a second chance in South Vietnam. Bredo, Salter, and Prosterman probably intentionally overstate the role of the Vietnamese government in reviving land reform. As participants in the move toward a new policy, they were aware that any new program had to look like a Vietnamese initiative to achieve the desired political purposes. Although some South Vietnamese politicians did wish to resume land redistribution and even discussed hiring Ladejinsky to design a new program, little could have taken place in the absence of U.S. technical and financial assistance.⁵⁹ On the other hand, the mere presence of pro-reform American advisers was not sufficient to ensure the creation of a bold, successful new program. John L. Cooper, who headed the USAID land reform team that arrived in Vietnam in late 1965, wasted no time in outlining the necessary components of an updated land reform policy. His March 1966 report, the first substantial document on South Vietnamese land reform in years, argued that further expropriation could not wait. The Saigon government, he believed, must reduce landlords’ maximum hectares as soon as possible. It was “necessary” and “urgent” for the United States to assist Vietnam in implementing a sweeping land reform strategy “at the earliest feasible time,” preferably before the promulgation of a new Vietnamese constitution.⁶⁰ But other American personnel in Saigon viewed Cooper as “a difficult and erratic man,” and the U.S. Embassy did not support his request.⁶¹

In retrospect, March 1967 and the winter of 1967–1968 stand out as two of the most important moments in the creation of a new redistribution program. In the first period, personnel changes in Washington and Saigon paved the way

57 Prosterman, “Land-to-the-Tiller,” pp. 758–59. In addition to the U.S. Agency for International Development-centered periodization that Bredo and Stanford Research Institute provided, Bredo also claimed that Nguyen Van Thieu’s January 1968 speech was a watershed moment.

58 FitzGerald, *Fire in the Lake*, p. 151.

59 Edward G. Lansdale to Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr. and William J. Porter, “Luncheon, February 23,” Vietnam, box 61, NSF, LBJL.

60 John L. Cooper, “Land Reform in the Republic of Vietnam,” *ibid.*; Laurence I. Hewes memorandum, 26 April 1966, NSF, Komer-Leonhart File, box 12, *ibid.*

61 Richard Moorsteen and Richard Holbrooke to Robert W. Komer, 7 December 1966, *ibid.*

for a new study on the desirability of further land reform efforts. In the second period, a bipartisan Congressional subcommittee harshly criticized the Johnson administration's lack of a coherent land reform policy for South Vietnam. Together, these developments produced a determination within the U.S. government to pursue a new, large-scale land reform program that would rectify the shortcomings of Ordinance 57. By the time Johnson left office in January 1969, movement toward a new law was well underway.

Between 1963 and 1967, one of the chief obstacles to land reform was Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr., the Johnson administration's own man in Saigon. The grandson of a famous statesman, Lodge spent his career in the public arena. He twice competed for a job that Lyndon Johnson ultimately won, first in 1960 as the Republican candidate for Vice President and again in 1964 as a hopeful in the Republican presidential primaries. President John F. Kennedy, who also had beaten Lodge in a narrow Massachusetts Senate race, appointed Lodge ambassador to South Vietnam in 1963. When Johnson became president after Kennedy's death, he retained Lodge, and quickly reappointed him after the brief interim in which Lodge returned home to campaign for the White House. Before he returned to Vietnam, the 63-year-old Lodge had this to say: "Something noble and brave is going on out there, and I am glad to have a part in it." Johnson was glad to have the "aura of bipartisanship" that Lodge brought to the team, as well as having someone of Lodge's ability and gravitas in what *The New York Times* called "just about the most grueling post, when it comes to work and climate, in the American service." He also undoubtedly hoped to assign Lodge some of the blame if things went badly in Vietnam.⁶²

Lodge did not have strong opinions on agricultural reform in South Vietnam. His first stint as ambassador occurred during the years when land reform was not a high priority within the U.S. government. But during Lodge's second stint, he found himself increasingly out of step with the growing interest on the subject. When Cooper of USAID called for a sweeping new policy of expropriation and redistribution, Lodge initially gave his approval.⁶³ But by the fall of 1966, he was of the opinion that, given the present administrative abilities of the Vietnamese government, a large-scale land reform program was "out of reach."⁶⁴ Lodge now believed that a "low-key," wait-and-see approach was more

62 "The Administration: To Have a Part in It," *Time*, 16 July 1965; "New Man in Saigon," *The New York Times*, 16 March 1967.

63 "Memorandum of Conversation, 23 August 1966," 25 August 1966, Komer-Leonhart File, box 1, NSF, LBJL.

64 Lodge to Komer, 23 September 1966, NSF, Komer-Leonhart File, box 12, *ibid.*

appropriate. It was alright, he wrote, for Cooper and others to provide the Vietnamese government with “quiet advice and encouragement,” but Vietnam, not the United States, should determine the pace and extent of reform.⁶⁵

One of Lodge’s final communiqués from Saigon “seriously” questioned the “desirability” of “dramatic action” on land reform.⁶⁶ This telegram leaned heavily on a recent report by James Rosenthal, a foreign service officer on temporary duty with the Saigon embassy. Rosenthal had rejected Cooper’s proposal for an “all-inclusive, formalized U.S. land reform program,” even though such a program would have had “immediate drama and propaganda appeal.”⁶⁷ Rosenthal believed that the American role should be to support and advise, but not to mandate, further land reform efforts. His views apparently influenced Lodge’s reversal on the issue. Rosenthal was pleased that USAID had focused the Saigon government’s “attention on further steps such as lowering of maximum retention rates, even if this has still not come about.” He believed that progressive Vietnamese politicians slowly but surely would overcome the opposition of landlords and implement the needed reforms. But those who wanted to foist “sudden or sweeping change” on the South Vietnamese government in the form of a fully revised land reform package were, Rosenthal believed, naïve; the Vietnamese state simply lacked the “competence” and the administrative capacity to enact such a program.⁶⁸

By the time Lodge adopted Rosenthal’s views as official embassy policy, his days as ambassador were numbered. The man behind the looming administrative shakeup was Robert W. Komer, special assistant to the president. Lodge disliked Komer, and the feeling was mutual. The ambassador’s New England gentility clashed with the Chicago native’s blunt, “take-no-prisoners attitude.” It was Lodge who gave Komer the lasting nickname “Blowtorch Bob” when he compared speaking with Komer to having a blowtorch applied to one’s backside.⁶⁹ Komer, for his part, thought that Lodge was a poor manager. In a memorandum to the president dated 2 March 1967, Komer urged Lodge’s dismissal. He also wanted to sack Lodge’s deputy, who was in charge of civilian pacification, in favor of a “better man.” Finally, Komer advised Johnson that Ambassador William Leonhart, having recently returned from Tanzania after a severance of diplomatic relations with that nation, should work full-time on

65 Lodge telegram, 20 February 1967, Vietnam, box 61, NSF, *ibid.*

66 *Ibid.*

67 James Rosenthal to Komer, 14 February 1967, *ibid.*

68 *Ibid.*

69 Tim Weiner, Robert Komer obituary, *The New York Times*, April 12, 2000.

Vietnamese issues.⁷⁰ Johnson quickly approved all of Komer's personnel recommendations. The president replaced Lodge as ambassador to South Vietnam with Ellsworth Bunker, named Komer to head the pacification program, and moved Leonhart to Komer's old advisory position.

The administrative shuffle Komer engineered in March 1967 was an important moment for land reform. Komer championed what many called "the other war." This was the effort to win the loyalty of the population through economic growth. "Blowtorch Bob" had no patience with Lodge's vacillations or the government of South Vietnam's slow progress on matters of development. A recently released document shows that land reform was high on Komer's agenda as early as the spring of 1966. He supported Cooper's calls for a strong new program, and was open to the idea "that land reform should be the key element in a package of economic reforms ... which should be presented to the [Saigon government] with maximum U.S. pressure."⁷¹ Komer later expressed "dismay" that Ambassador Lodge decided not to back Cooper's proposal.⁷² However, the detail-driven Komer sometimes lost sight of the big picture. Bredo had this tendency of Komer's in mind when he criticized those who believed "the hearts and minds of the peasants could be won by increasing the supply of fertilizer and pesticides, by introducing [high-yield] rice, improved hogs and poultry, by improving the credit system, and by providing the farmer with more technical information."⁷³ If Komer's increased role did not guarantee land reform's revival, it certainly created a more favorable atmosphere for dramatic developmental programs of the kind Bredo soon would propose.

The day after Johnson announced the personnel changes, Leonhart submitted a plan to "get the [Saigon government] moving on land reform" within the year. The first step, he wrote, was to conduct a detailed study on landholding patterns in rural South Vietnam. The Stanford Research Institute (SRI) was already "ready to go."⁷⁴ This leading American think tank received tens of millions of dollars each year in government and private contracts to research everything from missile defense to claims of psychic powers.⁷⁵ The USAID commissioned the SRI to create a report on the past, present, and future potential of land reform in South Vietnam. The SRI sent a preliminary survey team to the country in early 1967, and in February the team produced a proposal for a

70 Komer to President Lyndon B. Johnson, 2 March 1967, Vietnam, box 61, NSF, LBJL.

71 Memorandum to Robert Komer, 21 May 1966, Komer-Leonhart File, box 12, NSF, *ibid.*

72 "Memorandum of Conversation, August 23, 1966," 25 August 1966, box 1, *ibid.*

73 Bredo, "Agrarian Reform in Vietnam," p. 744.

74 William Leonhart to Rostow, 17 March 1967, Vietnam, box 61, NSF, LBJL.

75 "Science: The Magician and the Think Tank," *Time*, 12 March 1973.

more detailed study to take place later that year.⁷⁶ Bredo, a social scientist and agricultural development expert for the SRI, headed the project.⁷⁷ Much of the USAID's 1967 budget went to financing the SRI's fieldwork, which culminated in a five-volume report that provided the statistical foundation for a strong land reform policy.⁷⁸

The reception Bredo's team received in Vietnam illustrates the significance of the March 1967 administrative changes. In a letter from the U.S. Embassy in Saigon to the White House ten days before Komer's personnel recommendations took effect, Rosenthal expressed his misgivings about "the thought of a dozen or two high-powered academic types going out with a 'mission' on land reform."⁷⁹ Later that year, after the personnel changes, Komer himself met the SRI contingent in Saigon. He pressed Bredo's team to provide more than a mere "factual basis" for land reform; he wanted them to write a "comprehensive land tenure policy."⁸⁰ Clearly, historian Gabriel Kolko's assertion that in "early 1967 Komer no longer considered it [land reform] important" is simply wrong, and runs counter to his finding that "most senior American advisors favored land reform throughout this period."⁸¹ To be sure, even after March 1967 there were officials and observers who doubted the desirability of a sweeping land reform package. Moreover, when Bredo's team released its final report the following year, even many land reform advocates found its contents underwhelming.⁸² Nevertheless, the institutional changes Komer effected in Saigon and Washington in early 1967 created the most receptive atmosphere for a new agrarian reform program in over a decade.

The next and most dramatic tipping point was, perhaps unsurprisingly, bad press. The headline in the 17 December 1967 issue of *The Washington Star* summarized the story with stark simplicity: "Viet Cong Beat Saigon at Land Reform, House Unit Says." The "unit" was the House Foreign Operations and Government Information subcommittee. John Moss and Ogden Reid were its chairman and ranking minority member respectively. The two representatives had just made public a letter to Secretary of State Dean Rusk in which they lambasted the

76 "Progress Report on Secretary Freeman's Recommendations for Vietnam Agriculture," March 1967, Komer-Leonhart File, box 1, NSF, LBJL.

77 Jefferson P. Marquis, "The Other Warriors: American Social Scientists and Nation Building in Vietnam," *Diplomatic History* 24, no. 1 (Winter 2000), 93.

78 Stanford Research Institute, *Land Reform in Vietnam Working Papers*, Vol. I, Part 1, p. 1.

79 Rosenthal to Morsteen [sic], 6 March 1967, Komer-Leonhart File, box 12, NSF, LBJL.

80 Hans Heymann, Jr. to Leonhart, 23 June 1967, NSF, Komer-Leonhart File, box 12, LBJL.

81 Kolko, *Anatomy of a War*, p. 244.

82 See, for example, Robert L. Sansom to Rostow, November 16, 1968, Vietnam, box 61, NSF, LBJL.

Johnson administration's ineptitude on "the pressing problems of land reform" in South Vietnam. As a result of this inaction, Moss and Reid alleged, the Communist insurgency was free to pursue its own land reform and was winning the hearts and minds of rural Vietnamese citizens.⁸³

Moss, a Democrat from California's 3rd district in the Sacramento area, had a history of needling the federal government and the Vietnam war effort. A "quiet but combative former businessman," he joined the U.S. Navy during World War II and won a seat in California's state assembly shortly thereafter. Beginning with his first term in the U.S. House of Representatives in January 1953, Moss championed government transparency. He created the House Committee on Government Information in 1955 and spent much of his long public career working for the release of classified government documents.⁸⁴ In June 1966, Moss and several of his committee members visited Vietnam to highlight USAID's misuse of funds.⁸⁵ Given his suspicion of the government and his interest in Vietnam, it was perhaps inevitable that Moss would sniff out the government's weakness in promoting agrarian reform.

Reid was a Republican from the 26th district in western New York. He was perhaps best known as the former publisher of *The New York Herald Tribune*, which he and his wife Mary ran jointly in the late 1950s.⁸⁶ His nickname was "Brownie," apparently for no other reason than that his older brother Whitelaw, named after their famous grandfather, a 19th Century diplomat and newsman, went by "Whitey."⁸⁷ The affable Ogden frequented the Artist & Writers' Club, "a kind of cave inhabited by giants of journalism" located downstairs from the *Herald Tribune* offices.⁸⁸ When he and his wife sold the newspaper, he entered politics, first as ambassador to Israel and then, beginning in January 1963, as a U.S. representative.⁸⁹ As a congressman, Reid fought against the requirement that college students swear a "loyalty oath" when receiving federal financial aid.⁹⁰ His constituents would send him back to Capitol Hill even when he switched party affiliations during Richard

83 Robert Walters, "Viet Cong Beat Saigon at Land Reform, House Unit Says," *The Washington Star*, 17 December, 1967.

84 "The Congress: Bureaucracy Unbounded," *Time*, 1 July 1966; John Emerson Moss entry, Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=M001035> (accessed 12 November 2010).

85 "The War: Strayed AID," *Time*, 20 May 1966.

86 "Editors: Rage on the Sports Page," *Time*, 10 December 1965.

87 Robert D. McFadden, obituary of Whitelaw Reid, *The New York Times*, 19 April 2009.

88 "Hangouts: The Place Downstairs," *Time*, 3 May 1963.

89 "The Press: Newsman v. Newsman," *Time*, 20 March 1964.

90 "Loyalty Oath," *The New York Times*, 7 June 1965.

M. Nixon's Republican presidency. Like Moss, Reid was unafraid to challenge and confront the White House.

The Johnson administration knew that trouble was brewing in Congressman Moss' subcommittee. Suspicion generally focused on "Brownie" Reid, however, perhaps because he was a Republican. In a newly declassified document dated October 1966, Komer told then Ambassador Lodge that there was a growing pressure in the American media and on Capitol Hill regarding land reform, and named Reid as a prime instigator.⁹¹ Nevertheless, from mid-1967 onward, the administration referred to the looming Congressional criticism as "the Moss report." The report that Moss and Reid were compiling sent White House staff into a near panic and weighed heavily on the minds of the president's staff during the winter of 1967–1968. Johnson still was planning to run for reelection and did not relish criticism from Congress, particularly from a Democratic committee chairman, about his conduct of the war in Vietnam.

Moss and Reid first seized on the issue of land reform in August 1967 as part of their series of critiques of the war effort. Secretary of State Rusk told them that the matter was "being studied." Former Ambassador Lodge joined the discussion, saying that the lack of initiative on land reform was the fault of the Vietnamese, not the U.S. government.⁹² But internally, the administration was much concerned about the negative press that the Moss-Reid report might bring to the issue. On 15 August, Komer privately concurred with the Moss-Reid assessment. "On land reform," he wrote, "let's face the fact that the Government of Vietnam performance is unimpressive." Komer thought that the best "rebuttal to the Moss Subcommittee attacks" was to implement the new land reform suggestions coming from the Stanford Research Institute.⁹³

But a new program could take months to come into effect, and the Moss-Reid report was nearly ready for release. Reid, in particular, was "so exercised about the problem" that he believed that a "dramatic and sweeping" land reform should be a condition for any further U.S. aid to South Vietnam.⁹⁴ In November, as Moss' subcommittee prepared to publish its official report, Leonhart wrote a desperate memorandum to Harold B. Sanders, Jr., the president's legal counsel. He said that since it was probably impossible to have the report "quietly shelved," the next best option was to "get publication delayed for about sixty days." That hopefully

91 Komer to Lodge, 8 October 1966, Komer-Leonhart File, box 12, NSF, LBJL.

92 Richard Harwood, "Moss, Reid Again Demand That Saigon Be Forced to Effect Promised Land Reforms," *The Washington Post*, 17 December 1967.

93 Komer memorandum, 15 August 1967, NSF, Vietnam, box 59, LBJL.

94 Harwood, "Moss, Reid Again Demand That Saigon Be Forced to Effect Promised Land Reforms."

would give the U.S. Embassy enough time to spur the South Vietnamese government into action on a new land reform initiative and preempt the criticism. Leonhart asked Sanders to use his influence to delay the report.⁹⁵ Rumor in Washington also had it that “the White House had exerted pressure to tone down the language of the report before its release.”⁹⁶

With their report stalled in the process of a higher committee review, Moss and Reid prepared to leak its contents to the press. The report called for a reduction in landowners’ maximum hectare limit to less than five hectares, a major change from the one hundred plus an additional fifteen hectares allowed under Ordinance 57, and far more specific than any policy the White House, the U.S. Embassy in Saigon, or the South Vietnam government had yet put forth. On 14 December, in a last bid to avoid a public relations nightmare, Leonhart had land reform advisor Price Gittinger call Moss and Reid from Saigon. “I stayed out of it,” Leonhart reported, “in order not to risk press allegations that the White House wished the report delayed.” After Gittinger had spoken to the congressmen, Leonhart thought Moss would “go along” with the delay, but he suspected that Reid might proceed with the leak. “We’re not completely out of the woods,” he presciently admitted.⁹⁷ Two days later, at around 6:30 p.m., the White House received an advance copy of a United Press International wire service article. “Congressional investigators,” it began, “claimed Saturday [16 December] that South Vietnam’s land reform program is little more than a package of promises. In comparison, they said, the Viet Cong are winning the loyalty of peasants with an effective program of their own.”⁹⁸ Major newspapers ran versions of the story the next day.

The White House tried to control the damage. Despite the leak, the administration continued to ask Moss to “shelve or revise” the unreleased full report.⁹⁹ Secretary Rusk sent a lengthy and pointedly polite letter to Congressman Moss in which he attempted to debunk the data that Moss and Reid had collected.¹⁰⁰ At the same time, National Security Advisor Walt W. Rostow provided Johnson with a list of land reform actions already in progress. It mostly was limited to the current attempts of the Saigon government to enforce Ordinance 57’s weak provisions, but it gave the president some shelter against the recent

95 Leonhart to Harold B. Sanders, Jr., 13 November 1967, Vietnam, box 61, NSF, LBJL.

96 Robert Walters, “Viet Cong Beat Saigon at Land Reform, House Unit Says,” *The Washington Star*, 17 December 1967.

97 Leonhart to Rostow, 14 December 1967, Vietnam, box 61, NSF, LBJL.

98 Untitled and undated advance copy of United Press International article, *ibid.*

99 Leonhart to Rostow, 21 January 1968, *ibid.*

100 Dean Rusk to John Moss, 19 January 1968, *ibid.*

criticisms.¹⁰¹ In a telegram to the U.S. Embassy in Saigon in late January, however, Rusk was disarmingly honest about where land reform really stood in the winter of 1967–1968. The “Moss subcommittee report has begun to focus renewed attention on problem of land reform,” he cabled. The White House had “been pointing so far to past reforms of Diem period, problems of security and administration since early 1960’s, [and the government of Vietnam’s] resumption of limited programs since 1966.” But, Rusk confessed, these tactics amounted to nothing more than “a holding operation.” He concluded that “we need more substantial fare if explanations to remain credible.”¹⁰² Congress finally released the full Moss-Reid report in March 1968. By then a new and improved land reform program was only a matter of time.

Unfortunately, time was something the Republic of Vietnam no longer had in abundance. The same was true of the Johnson administration. In March, after an embarrassing near defeat in the New Hampshire presidential primary election, Johnson declared that he neither would seek nor accept his party’s nomination for another term. Work on land reform continued. National Security Council staffer Marshall Wright wrote a positive review of the SRI’s finished report when it finally appeared in the fall of 1968.¹⁰³ Rostow sent an exuberant memorandum to the president, claiming that the USAID finally had “found the key to the land reform dilemma.”¹⁰⁴ The solution was as simple as it was overdue: buy land from landlords and distribute it to tenant farmers, devise a system to compensate landlords and help farmers purchase the land they tilled, and promote security of tenure for remaining tenants. Just a few months before leaving office, Johnson approved a proposal to make these initiatives official U.S. policy.¹⁰⁵

For a time, a spirit of optimism prevailed. In the spring of 1969, the government of South Vietnam announced the Land-to-the-Tiller Law, which took effect the next year. It set the maximum hectare limit at fifteen, provided generous terms to landlords, and offered land to tenants at no cost. The United States would fund the program and local villages would implement it.¹⁰⁶ SRI Director William Bredo predicted that the United States and South Vietnam would win the war as a result of the new law.¹⁰⁷ Significantly, Wolf Ladejinsky

101 Rostow to Johnson, 13 January 1968, *ibid.*

102 Rusk to U.S. Embassy, 24[?] January 1968, *ibid.*

103 Wright to Rostow, 10 September 1968, box 58, *ibid.*

104 Rostow to Johnson, 16 September 1968, *ibid.*

105 Rostow to Johnson, 18 October 1968, box 61, *ibid.*

106 Salter, “The Broadening Base of Land Reform,” pp. 731–33.

107 Bredo, “Agrarian Reform in Vietnam,” p. 750.

had advocated essentially the same measures more than a decade earlier, but Diem had been unwilling to adopt, implement, or enforce so strong a program. Under Ambassador Lodge, the U.S. Embassy's reluctance to push the Saigon government on land reform hampered early efforts to revive it in 1965 and 1966. Komer's increased influence helped to create a more receptive atmosphere for land reform proposals beginning early in 1967, and bipartisan Congressional pressure forced the Johnson administration to make it a top priority a year later. A sweeping new law soon emerged, but South Vietnam already had missed its chance to ride the wave of land reform that swept through East Asia in the 1940s and 1950s. As Bredo reflected in a 1986 article, the "effort was definitely not a case of being 'too little too late,' it was just too late—several years too late!"¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁸ William Bredo, "U.S. Security: Potential of Land Reform Policy Support in the Third World," *Journal of Political & Military Sociology* 14, no. 2 (Fall 1986), 284.