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THE USE OF SUPERSTITIONS IN PSYCHOLOGICAL OPERATIONS  
IN VIETNAM

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PSYCHOLOGICAL POLICY AND GUIDANCE AND IS TO BE IMPLEMENTED  
AS PERTINENT BY ALL U.S. ELEMENTS IN VIETNAM.

**THE USE OF SUPERSTITIONS IN PSYCHOLOGICAL OPERATIONS  
IN VIETNAM**

**PROBLEM:**

- a. To devise guidelines for the exploitation of enemy vulnerabilities provided by superstitions and deeply-held traditional beliefs.
- b. To be aware of and accommodate those superstitions of friendly forces and populations that may have a bearing on military operations.

**DISCUSSION:**

A strong superstition or a deeply-held belief shared by a substantial number of the enemy target audience can be used as a psychological weapon because it permits with some degree of probability the prediction of individual or group behavior under a given set of conditions. To use an enemy superstition as a starting point for psychological operations, however, one must be sure of the conditions and control the stimuli that trigger the desired behavior.

The first step in the manipulation of a superstition as an enemy vulnerability is its exact identification and detailed definition of its spread and intensity among the target audience. The second step is to insure friendly control of the stimuli and the capability to create a situation that will trigger the desired superstitious behavior. Both conditions must be met or the psyops effort will not yield the desired results; it might even backfire!

As an illustration, one can cite the recent notion spread among combat troops in the First Corps area that VC and NVN troops were deathly afraid of the "Ace of Spades" as an omen of death. In consequence soldiers, turned psy-warriors with the assistance of playing card manufacturers, began leaving the ominous card in battle areas and on patrols into enemy-held territory. The notion was based on isolated instances of behavior among Montagnard tribesmen familiar from French days with the Western deck of cards. A subsequent survey determined that the ace of spades does not trigger substantial fear reactions among most Vietnamese because the various local playing cards have their own set of symbols, generally of Chinese derivation.

Here then was an incorrect identification of a superstition coupled with a friendly capability to exploit the presumed condition. It did not work.

For a correct identification of a superstition coupled with an inability to exploit same, one could postulate the case of an enemy dictator or ruling group with deeply-held beliefs in astrological predictions of the future. Unless the favored soothsayer can be motivated to say the desired things - an unlikely possibility - the accurate knowledge of this enemy weakness could not be turned to friendly advantage.

In a minor key, psyops use of the venerated figure of Tran Hung Dao, victor in 1285 over the Golden Horde led by Kublai Khan's Chinese vassal, satisfies both requirements. We know the supernatural qualities with which the heroic figure of Tran Hung Dao is endowed in the popular mind, and the GVN has the capability of invoking him in patriotic appeals aimed against the invaders (See JUSPAO Poster # 1271) which are among the most popular produced in the psyops field to date.

On the accomodation of friendly superstitions it is instructive to quote from a First Corps after-action report: ... "As we started on the patrol we heard a lot of noise as the men walked. The advisor, who was brand new, stopped them and found hanging around their necks, dangling from their belt or in their pockets objects of stone, wood and metal. The noise would have surely revealed our position, so the advisor collected all the amulets and sent them back to the camp area. This proved to be a bad mistake. Before we had penetrated deeply into the forest we had lost half the men. The other half would have been better off lost, because they believed it was their time to die. They had been deprived of the protection of the good spirits. Needless to say, we came back without accomplishing our mission..."

An experienced advisor would have balanced the noise factor against the morale effect of depriving the soldiers of their magical protection. A compromise could possibly have been found in wrapping the amulets in some sound absorbing material.

In summary, the manipulation of superstitions is a delicate affair. Tampering with deeply-held beliefs, seeking to turn them to your advantage means in effect playing God and it should only be attempted if one can get away with it and the game is indeed worth the candle. Failure can lead to ridicule, charges of clumsiness and callousness that can blacken the reputation of psychological operations in general. It is a weapon to be employed selectively and with utmost skill and deftness. There can be no excuse for failure.

#### GUIDANCE:

1. To exploit enemy superstitions, psyops personnel must be certain that:
  - a. The superstition or belief is real and powerful.
  - b. They have the capability of manipulating it to achieve results favorable to the friendly forces.
2. As a corollary, the psyops effort must insure that the audience against which a superstition campaign is launched is sufficiently homogeneous in their beliefs to be susceptible to this kind of manipulation. Superstitions vary widely; for example, among city and country people and the inhabitants of different regions of the same country, both in kind and in degree of intensity.

3. Would-be superstition manipulators must be prepared to face a credibility test if their efforts are traced to the source. Additionally, the triggering device of the superstition response must seem entirely credible to the target audience. As an example, many Vietnamese, particularly in rural areas, are provoked into a fear response if startled at night by the hoot of an owl or the call of a crow. These are considered death omens. The response will not occur, however, if the sound can be detected in any way as originating from an artificial source, such as a loudspeaker.

4. A psyops operator's desire to take advantage of manipulating enemy superstitions surreptitiously must be balanced against the counterproductive effects of possible failure and exposure of the attempt by the mass media. The U.S. image and the effectiveness of future psyops might lose more than the commander might hope to gain by successful execution of the plan.

5. In summary, enemy superstition manipulation should not be lightly employed by field psyops personnel. Proposals to make appeals based on superstitions or otherwise manipulate target audience beliefs will be forwarded in each case to JUSPAO and/or MACPD through the respective channels of their originators. They will be carefully analyzed there in the light of the considerations spelled out in this guidance. No psyops campaign in the area of superstition manipulation will be undertaken without JUSPAO/MACPD approval.

6. Where the superstitions of friendly forces and populations are concerned, psyops personnel will assist commanders as required or called upon in devising indoctrination materials familiarizing troops with these beliefs and counseling respect for and sensitivity to local beliefs and traditions.